

THE LIFE OF GAMPOPA Part 2 – Receiving Praise and Criticism

The teacher monk who found Gampopa laying on the ground, extremely weak from having walked alone for so long without food and water, revived him and then agreed to go with him toward Drin, where Milarepa was staying. So the two journeyed together, walking all day for two and a half days. They finally arrived at a marketplace in Drin, and saw a lady who was weaving cloth, sitting at her loom outside her house.



Gampopa asked her, “It is said that the lord of yogis, one called Milarepa, is staying in this land. Do you know where he lives?”

The lady asked in return, “Where do you come from?”

Gampopa replied, “I am from the sun-like region of Ü (Central Tibet), and I have come to see the Jetsun Milarepa.”

The lady said, “Then I will give you some food and drink. Please come inside.”

She went inside her house and offered Gampopa and the teacher a seat. She served them sweet tea and something to eat. Then she said to Gampopa,

“The Jetsun Milarepa knew ahead of time that you would be coming and also said something about the future. Yesterday, he saw that you were exhausted and sent you blessings. I asked him to allow me to come and guide you to meet him.”

Gampopa thought, “That is true. Because of the guru’s blessing, I didn’t die. He knew that I would be coming and that it’s my destiny to be his special student.” Thinking this, he felt a little bit proud.

Milarepa knew this and in order to get rid of Gampopa’s pride, he didn’t allow Gampopa to meet him for two weeks. Perhaps Gampopa would feel a bit more humble - not so special anymore - if he had to wait two weeks to see his guru. One of Milarepa’s students came to bring Gampopa a clay pot and some firewood, and brought him to a small cave on a cliff to stay for a while.

After two weeks, the lady guided Gampopa and the teacher monk to the place where Milarepa was staying. When they arrived, Milarepa transformed Rechungpa and Shiwa Ö so that they looked identical to him, and then sat down with them. Gampopa looked at the three, and didn't know which one was the real Milarepa. Rechungpa pointed with his finger at Milarepa and said, "The Jetsun is in the middle." Perhaps Gampopa felt more humble when he couldn't recognize which one was his guru, and Rechungpa had to point him out.

Gampopa made an offering with 16 pieces of gold and a block of tea. He told Milarepa in detail about his journey from his home in Central Tibet. Then he said,

"Jetsun, I ask you, please tell me your life story."

The great Milarepa sat for a while with his eyes half closed. Then he took a small piece of gold from the center of Gampopa's mandala offering, and threw it in the sky saying, "An offering to Marpa of Lhodrak!" Then from the sky came an unbelievably bright light, and loud sound. Milarepa took a cup made from the top of a human skull, and filled it with liquor. Then he drank some, and said to Gampopa,



"Drink the rest!" and gave the skull cup to him.

Gampopa was a monk, and according to the strict rules for Buddhist monks, they were not allowed to drink alcohol. And, they didn't drink out of cups made from human bone.

Should he refuse to drink, because he was a monk, and he wanted to show that he was a good monk who obeys the rules? Or should he drink because he should obey the command of his guru? Then he would be violating the rules of Buddhist monks right in front of his guru and the many students sitting there. He was being tested and he wasn't sure what to do.

Milarepa said, "Don't think too much, just drink!"

Gampopa was afraid he would miss an important blessing if he disobeyed his guru. So he drank all the liquor from the cup down to the last drop. Milarepa knew then that by obeying the command of the guru, Gampopa accepted his lineage of gurus – the Whispered Lineage, the

Kagyü lineage – of Milarepa’s guru Marpa, Marpa’s guru Naropa, and Naropa’s guru Tilopa, who received the special secret teachings from Vajradhara, the original Buddha.

Milarepa asked, “What is your name?”

Gampopa told him the name that he was given when he became a monk, “Sönam Rinchen.”



The name means Precious Merit. Milarepa said three times, “You have accumulated great masses of merit and are most precious among all sentient beings.”

Then Milarepa said, “That you have come here out of faith for me is truly marvelous. I have no desire for your gold or your tea. My life story is like this.” And then he told about Marpa, and receiving instructions and teachings from him. He said he would give Gampopa the blessing of the lineage, and all the instructions and teachings. He told Gampopa to practice them and spread the teachings to others. Finally, he said, “If you want to hold the Kagyü teachings, look at my conduct, and practice like me. This is my welcome for you.”

Gampopa prepared some tea and offered it to Milarepa, who enjoyed it immensely. And then Milarepa and his students prepared tea with wonderful flavor for Gampopa.

The teacher monk who had traveled with Gampopa requested a blessing and a Dharma connection from Milarepa. In reply, Milarepa said,

“Whatever object of attachment you have, offer it to me for a blessing.”

The teacher monk said, “I have nothing to offer.”

Milarepa said to him, “You are hiding lots of gold on your body, but you claim to have nothing. Such a shame. What use is a blessing with no faith? And, you have come here for reasons of trading wool. Go on, may you have no problems in your activities.”

Gampopa thought, “When we’re around Milarepa, we can’t pretend or act like we are good when we’re not. We need to be focused and mindful.” He then thought of Milarepa as the same as a buddha.

Milarepa asked Gampopa whether he had received empowerments before. Gampopa replied that he had gotten empowerments and practice instructions from previous gurus and that he had excellent meditations.

Milarepa burst out with a laugh, “Ha ha! If you squeeze sand, you won’t get oil. You will get oil if you squeeze mustard seeds. Meditate on my instructions and then you will see the essence of the mind. For this practice, I’m not saying that the empowerments you received before are not good, but you must have the blessings of my tradition’s lineage.”



In accordance with the Kagyu teachings, Milarepa gave him the blessing and practice instructions of Vajrayogini. Following the instructions Milarepa gave him, Gampopa meditated outside a cave.

On the first evening, heat blazed in his body, so then he meditated blissfully for seven days with his body staying very warm despite the cold weather. He had a beautiful vision of the five families of the Buddhas.

He told Milarepa of this wondrous experience, and Milarepa replied,

“This is just like when you press on your eyeball and look at the moon, you see two moons. It is neither something wrong nor something positive.”

Although he was told that his experience wasn’t anything great, Gampopa still felt inspired to continue meditating. After practicing meditation for three months, he saw the universe swirling above him like a spinning wheel, and then he gagged and fainted. Later, he told Milarepa about this experience. He explained about the energy moving in the body and said,

“This is neither something wrong nor something positive. Continue to meditate.”

Milarepa didn’t seem impressed. On another morning, Gampopa was filled with compassion and saw the moon on top of his head. He told this to Milarepa, who still didn’t seem very impressed. He gave a little explanation about the energy moving in his head and said,

“This is neither something wrong nor something positive. Continue to meditate.”



One evening he saw the Black Line Hell, one of the hell-worlds, in which black lines are drawn from the forehead down the middle of the body of the beings there, to guide a huge saw that cuts the people in half as torture resulting from their terrible karmas.

It made Gampopa feel terribly sad and depressed. He felt deep compassion for the poor suffering beings.

He told his guru about it.

Milarepa said, “Your meditation belt was too short. Lengthen your belt a little,” and “It’s neither something wrong nor something positive. Continue to meditate.”

One day, Gampopa saw vividly all the happy devas of the six worlds, and then saw his mother dying of thirst. He told Milarepa about it, who explained why he saw it, and gave him some exercises to do. Gampopa did the exercises for a month, and then he started feeling extremely strange – he constantly wanted to jump and shake his body, and he had the uncontrollable urge to cry and wail. This made him really worried - what was going on? It seemed something was terribly wrong. Was he about to go crazy? Was it something evil? So he asked Milarepa, “Is this some kind of demon?”

Milarepa explained that something was happening with the energy in Gampopa’s heart, and told him not to stop the exercises and to continue meditating. Again he said, “It’s neither something wrong nor something positive.” Then he praised him by saying three times, mysteriously, “What a brave man you are! And now . . . and now”

Gampopa continued meditating and told Milarepa about more interesting experiences he was having, to which Milarepa always said, “It’s neither something wrong nor something positive. Continue to meditate.”

One night, Gampopa thought his body was just like a skeleton with no muscles or blood, and he told Milarepa, who told him that his body’s inner energies have become too strong, he needs to practice gently. Gampopa continued practicing, and the next morning, he had an interesting dream that he was wearing a hat with red silk and a vulture feather, green boots, white silk clothes with jewels, and a belt with flowers and pearls, and carrying a precious staff, a bowl filled with nectar, bags of rice, and a deerskin. In the dream he saw himself as a herder of cows and sheep, and saw many women bowing on the ground, and then saw himself sitting down with his body blazing like fire and the sun and moon in his heart. When he woke up, he wondered what it meant and whether it was a good dream or a bad dream.

He thought, "The guru Jetsun is an actual all-knowing buddha in person; I can ask him." He went directly to see Milarepa.

When he arrived, Milarepa was laying down rubbing his head with a thick cloth. Gampopa prostrated, bowing down on the ground, and said, "Jetsun, I have something very important to ask you. Please awake so that I may ask."

Milarepa said, "Some ideas have come to you. I saw it this morning in my meditation. What is it that's troubling you?"

Gampopa replied, "My precious guru, I had some signs in a dream. Please listen to them and tell me if they are good or bad signs." Then Gampopa sang a song with words of devotion honoring his guru, and then he described his dream.



Milarepa replied, "Son, teacher-doctor, don't let your mind be uneasy. Let your mind rest, relaxed at ease. Don't get caught up in the web of thoughts that cling to a self. . . . I am a yogi who is trained in what the body really is, so I can interpret dreams. I also know how to transform dreams. So, son, this old father will now explain the signs in the dream that you spoke of. I will explain it in detail to make it clear and point out its symbolic meaning. Listen, focused, without distraction."

He sang a song, explaining that the dream is a wondrous prophecy of what is to come, that each of the things he was wearing indicates his great accomplishments in meditation and Dharma, and that he will benefit and protect many beings with love and compassion, teach the Kagyu lineage instructions, and clear away suffering of all types of beings. Milarepa also sang that the life of Gampopa will be without obstacles, that virtue will spread throughout Tibet, and that he will be a buddha to help all beings.

He said it's not a bad dream but a good dream, and that Gampopa must train in understanding dreams. He said that when Gampopa finds that the signs in the dream are true, then a special devotion toward Milarepa will arise in him, more than he has now.

Finally, he said that in this life, Gampopa will be liberated from birth and death. He won't have to take any more births due to karma, but may choose to be born again to help beings to be liberated from suffering.

QUESTIONS:

1. Why did Gampopa have to wait two weeks to see Milarepa? (to get rid of Gampopa's pride, Milarepa made him wait)
2. What did Milarepa offer him to drink in the skull cup? (liquor (alcohol))
3. What did Gampopa prove to Milarepa by drinking the alcohol? (that he accepted Milarepa's lineage of gurus, the Kagyu lineage)
4. When Gampopa said he had empowerments from other gurus and had excellent meditations, did Milarepa praise him, or was he critical? (critical)
5. When Gampopa told Milarepa about his wonderful meditation experiences, did Milarepa praise him? (no)
6. When Gampopa told Milarepa about the experience when he thought something was terribly wrong, how did Milarepa praise him? (he said "What a brave man you are")

DHARMA DISCUSSION – Receiving Praise and Criticism:

*"A dharma practitioner is one who gives up his bad attitude.
If you respect someone's criticism of you, that is loving-kindness.
If you stay humble, you will become popular. . . .
If you have great bodhicitta, excellence comes."* (Milarepa, 100,000 Songs, p. 451)

*"When praise and honor come your way,
Be on the lookout for the arising of pride.
At all times and in every way, tame the evil demons within your mind-stream."* (p. 91)

"If you long for pleasing words, you'll be wrecked by fame." (p. 589)

"If you prefer to have praise and fame, at that point, you've arrived at the eight [worldly] concerns." (p. 587)

"Be respectful to each of your parents." (p. 674)

"Evil ones not taking stock of themselves is the deceptive means for bringing their own demise." (p. 448)

"Since you are young and you think so well of yourself, you'll deride, in return, the one who tells you [that] you are prideful, ill-mannered and use coarse speech." (p. 449)

As we heard in the story, Milarepa openly criticized people who were doing something wrong. He criticized the teacher who traveled with Gampopa, pointing out that the teacher was dishonest about having nothing to offer, when actually he had gold with him. And Milarepa pointed out that the teacher wanted to trade wool. So, apparently, he didn't go there for spiritual reasons.

Hearing his, Gampopa quickly learned that no one can hide anything from Milarepa – he knows what they're really thinking and doing. But he had no problem with that – he didn't worry that Milarepa might criticize too much. Instead, he respected Milarepa as a great teacher and a fully enlightened person, a buddha.

Milarepa was not the kind of person who rewarded his students' progress with praise. He didn't often tell them what a good job they were doing. Instead, he pointed out what they need to do to be even better. He didn't want his students to have big egos, to become arrogant and show off. He knew so many other teachers who let their ego and arrogance ruin themselves. So he was careful not to give much praise.

How did Gampopa respond when Milarepa didn't praise him for his great meditation efforts, but just said it was neither good nor bad? Did he get insulted, or frustrated, or give up? No. And when Milarepa said what a brave man Gampopa was, did Gampopa get all excited? No.

Gampopa is a good example of how we should try not to be too excited when we are praised, and not to be too upset when we're not praised for our efforts, or when we are criticized. Of course, we feel happy when someone appreciates what we did. We feel disappointed when we worked hard on something and no one seems to care. And it's painful when we are criticized. But when our reactions are so strong that we become arrogant or a show-off, or angry, jealous or revengeful, then we are developing negative emotions that harm us.

So how do we make sure our reactions aren't so strong that we are harming ourselves? First, we can be mindful of how we feel, what we think and what we say in response to praise and criticism, and when we're not praised. Do you have an angry voice when you aren't noticed or when you are criticized? Do you think negative things about someone else who was praised for their efforts? Do you feel like criticizing a parent, teacher or coach who criticizes you or doesn't praise you? Do you feel like hurting or insulting a kid who criticizes you? Next, when you have thoughts or feelings like this, try to remember: There isn't something wrong with you because you were criticized. If you were criticized by another kid, it may be that the kid is jealous or trying to get attention. If you were never criticized (especially by parent or teacher), you wouldn't learn! Appreciate it. You aren't always going to be praised when you do something well. Being humble and not always looking for attention makes you more likeable. Note: There are some parents who criticize their child too much; outside help may be needed.

ACTIVITY – Worksheet on receiving praise and criticism:

For each of the following scenarios, write a “1” next to the response (a, b or c) that is most Dharmic, a “3” next to the response that is least Dharmic, and a “2” for the one that is in between. Maybe they are easy, but it helps us to recognize some ways we can improve our attitude and behavior!

1. My mother tells my sister or brother that she did a great job cleaning the bedroom but says nothing to me even though I cleaned my room.
 - a. I am annoyed that she didn't tell me that I did a great job cleaning my room.
 - b. I clean my room more so she will tell me I did a good job.
 - c. I make sure my room is clean and know my mother will be glad even if she says nothing.

2. A kid at school says my painting doesn't look very good.
 - a. I tell him how bad his painting looks.
 - b. I work on it some more to try to make it look better.
 - c. I think he maybe he is just jealous or trying to make me feel bad.

3. My mother says I didn't do the dishes the right way.
 - a. I ask her, “what did I do that wasn't right?”
 - b. I make an excuse, saying that I was in a hurry.
 - c. I say that my friends don't have to do the dishes at their house.

4. My teacher tells our group that we did a fantastic job.
 - a. I look around to make sure other groups heard that we are fantastic.
 - b. I say “thank you” and know I worked hard.
 - c. I say “thank you” and feel grateful to the others in my group.

5. I showed my father my science project that I was proud of, but my father just said, “I'm really tired, I'll look at it tomorrow.”
 - a. I know I did the project really well, and I feel annoyed that he won't even look at it.
 - b. I tell him that he needs to look at it right now.
 - c. I know I did the project really well, and wait until tomorrow to show it to him.

6. My coach tells a teammate that he did a really good job, but told me I wasn't trying hard enough.
 - a. I think my coach just likes my teammate better than me.
 - b. I am glad my coach is encouraging me to try harder so I can improve.
 - c. I am annoyed that my coach never seems to notice that I am improving.