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LIFE STORY OF MILAREPA

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Below is the brief foreword and the first of nine chapters.....

This is the story of Milarepa, a Buddhist saint who lived in Tibet 900 years ago. It takes place along the northern slope of the Himalayas called the Tsang, which parallels the Tsangpo river which in turn, flows west to east and eventually becomes the mighty Brahmaputra river.

As a boy, Milarepa was known by the name Fortuitous. During his late teens he was referred to as 'Great Magician.' All through the latter part of his life he is known as Milarepa. This story is based in large part upon true events in his life. Tibetans in particular, and others who are familiar with Tibetan Buddhism, place Milarepa in an exalted status as both a folk hero, and a living Buddha. He stands squarely within one of the four main pillars of Tibetan Buddhism, namely the Kagyu lineage, which is an unbroken succession of lamas (lama, meaning; spiritual teacher) dating from ancient times.

This story also offers insights to cultural quirks of long-ago Tibet, and to the type of Buddhism mixed with Bon animistic beliefs that swirled around time. Some episodes may seem outlandish, but the listener can decide whether those parts are true-to-life depictions or whether they're embellishments that one might expect from centuries of re-telling a story of such epic proportions.

This text does not attempt to cover the myriad details of Milarepa's life, such as naming the dozens of caves where he meditated - along with their specific locations. Nor does it try to explain the intricacies of Buddhist philosophy. Rather, it attempts to tell the fascinating story of a real man and his struggle to gain religion.

Here begins the Story of Milarepa,

In the middle of autumn in the year of the water dragon (1052) under the star victorious of the eighth constellation in the 25th day of the moon, I was born. My father, Mila Banner of Wisdom was away in another province at the time harvesting barley. My mother, White Garland, sent him a letter which said, "I have given birth to a son. Come quickly to name him and let us celebrate his name day."

When my father received the letter he was filled with joy and said, "Marvelous, my son has his name already. Since his birth brings me such joy, I will name him 'Fortuitous.'"

I was raised with love and heard only gentle voices of support. I was a happy child. When I was four, my mother gave birth to a girl. Peta and I were cherished children, her with her long silken tresses like spun gold and my long shiny hair of turquoise black.

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When I was about seven, my father became ill and was nearing death. Relatives and friends converged on our homestead, some traveling for days from remote valleys nestled in the northern slopes of the Himalayan range overlooking the long Tsangpo valley. All came to honor my father's passing, though some also harbored hopes of inheriting a portion of his wealth.

Father prepared a will and read to all who were assembled; "Since my son is still small, I entrust him and my property to his aunt and uncle until such time as he is old enough to take care of such affairs himself. The will went on to say: "Since I arrived in this region, I have done well for myself and my family. In the mountains we have horses, yaks and sheep. In the valley there is my field called 'Fertile Triangle.' There is also my large house, under which we keep cows, goats and asses. In the attic loft we have our granary plus stores of copper, iron, silver and gold – as well as turquoise gems, plus precious fabrics and silk."

"When my son is of age, let him marry his childhood sweetheart Zessay – at which time he can take possession of all that is his inheritance. During the interim period I have arranged for his aunt and uncle to take good care of him, and watch out for his sister's and his mother's well being. After I die, I will be watching all of you from the realm of the dead."

After making that proclamation, my father passed away.

A short while later, my aunt and uncle took firm control of all that was bequeathed. Very soon after that, they turned their back on promises they had made to my father. My sister, my mother and I became virtual slaves within a short time. During summers, we were required to work full time for my uncle in the fields. During the winter when the freezing snows blew, we became full-time servants of my aunt, working long hours with wool. Our fingers became stiff with cold. When the brief days turned to night, we had to keep working by the dim light of yak butter candles.

Our food was meager and the work was strenuous. Our clothing deteriorated to tattered strips of cloth held together by bits of grass string. As we became increasingly malnourished, our once lovely tresses became matted and lice-ridden. Thus did we struggle to exist for many long years.

When I reached my fifteenth year, my mother decided to claim our full inheritance in my name. She scraped together every bit of savings and borrowed what she could in order to arrange a feast for the announcement. With white barley flour, bread and cakes were made. With black barley, beer was brewed. Animals were corralled to be slaughtered for meat. My mother and Peta even went around to borrow furniture, ornate carpets and porcelain dishes for the banquet. She invited everyone in the village, and placed my aunt and uncle at the most honored place at the table.

Near the end of the banquet, my mother stood up and loudly banged a bamboo cow bell. When she had everyone's attention she declared, "you all know that when there is a beer fest, it is time for announcements. Well here goes. Some of you are old enough to remember the last words spoken by my husband, Mila Banner of wisdom, at the time of his death. My son is now fifteen and of age to marry Zessay, his sweetheart. They are now old enough to have their own home." Mother then turned to face my aunt and uncle and said in a slightly wavering but loud voice, "return the property and possessions which rightfully belong to us according to my departed husband's will. You know that's what he wanted and you know it's the right thing to do."

The aunt and uncle immediately rebuffed the idea of returning anything. They had run the manor for so many years that they had come to consider it all belonged to them. The uncle spoke tersely saying, "how can you claim to be poor? Look at this. You have prepared a lavish banquet – enough to feed the entire village. Even I could not afford such lavishness."

Brushing aside my mother's weeping, he continued, "If you are many, make war upon us. If you are few, cast spells – and see whether that will get you what you want." With those words, my aunt and uncle departed, leaving the three of us weeping on the floor. Some of the guests offered whispered words of comfort. Other guests, who worked for my uncle, offered only scowls, and ambled out of the meeting hall. Though we didn't succeed in gaining any portion of our inheritance, from that point on we ceased to be slavish servants of my aunt and uncle.

Now that we were on our own, my sister Peta did what she could to contribute. Sometimes she would 'run at the sound of the bell and run when the smoke was rising,' which is a Tibetan expression for; showing up uninvited at monasteries or special communal events where there would be food on offer. She quickly stuff her mouth with food, while privately stuffing the pockets of her cloak with morsels to bring back home for my mother and me.

My mother was able to earn a bit by spinning and weaving wool – and in this way, she was able to send me to a lama who taught me to read and write. Lama is the Tibetan word for teacher.

One day I accompanied my lama to a ceremony. The beer was flowing like water. I got a bit tipsy and decided to head home. On the way, people were singing along the roadside, which inspired me to belt out a tune as I strolled along. I was still singing gaily as I got to the entry of my humble home. Inside, my mother was roasting barley and heard my voice.

"What is this?" she wondered, "it sounds like my son's voice, but how can he be singing when our family's plight is so miserable?"

She looked out the window and saw me in my tuneful oblivion. Her right hand dropped the spoon and her left hand dropped the whisk. She grabbed a stick in one hand and a handful of ashes in the other and strode out to confront me. The barley was left in the kitchen to burn to a powdery crisp.

Straight away, she threw the ashes in my face – blinding me with its sting, and just as quickly began striking me on the head and shoulders, all the while calling out, "Oh, Mila my now-departed husband, is this the son you have sired!? This boy, who looks like a man, is sweetly singing while your family drowns in misery."

Peta heard the commotion and arrived upon the scene. By this time, my mother was weeping, but she continued to strike me, while wailing, "Oh Mila, he is not fit to be your son. Look at our miserable fate, mother son and daughter!" Peta was then able to restrain my mother from beating me, and the three of us were consumed by weeping.

I pleaded to my mother, "what then should I do – I will do whatever you wish."

She said, "I sorely wish you were dressed smartly like a real man and mounted on a tall horse. I wish you had thick leather boots with

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sharpened stirrups, so you could gallop up to your aunt and uncle and rip open their necks. As that is not possible, I wish for you to go learn black magic so you can cast spells to destroy our enemies down to the ninth generation."

From that day, plans were set in motion for me to go study black magic and the casting of spells. I set off with some other young fellows who also sought the same teachings.

Before departing, my mother took my traveling companions aside and told them that her son had no will power, so he must be spurred on to achieve all that he can. After a year of studying with a master named Yungto, my fellow students were ready to move on, but I felt I had not learned any really significant magic, other than a few spells and the mixing of some potions.

I started to depart with my friends, but then turned and returned to visit the teacher again. He asked why I had come back, and I was compelled to explain my desperate need to learn serious black magic. For the first time, I imparted the story to him of the oppression my family had suffered at my village. He listened to my story, then decided to teach me a special mantra with which I could create hailstorms. He then recommended a master in another region who could teach me incantations which cause death, and another which can cause the loss of consciousness.

I traveled again and found the great magician he referred me to. After offering him gifts and telling my story of oppression, he agreed to be my teacher. He had me build a stone structure with no visible openings and a hidden entrance, and then he taught me the incantations.

I went inside the new structure and recited the magic mantra for seven days, and then continued for another seven days. At the end of those fourteen days, we received word that 35 people in my village had been seriously harmed in a dramatic fashion. They were all people who were closely associated with my aunt and uncle and had been known to contribute to my family's suffering. I later found out the details of the black magic's affect: A banquet had been held at my uncle's mansion. There were 35 guests inside, all members of my uncle's family and their close associates. The house suddenly shook violently and collapsed, seriously injuring all within, except my aunt and uncle who were outside fetching provisions for the party.

When my mother heard what happened, she let out a cry of joy. She fastened a scrap of cloth to a stick and walked around waving the little banner while proclaiming, "Alas, does my deceased husband Mila Banner of wisdom have a son?! Not long ago the uncle and aunt declared to us, 'if you are many, make war on us. If you are few, cast spells.' Well this is what's been done this glorious day!"

Some of the villagers who heard her shouts of triumph thought she was justified, but felt that her revenge was too dire. They talked among themselves, saying she should be killed for her rejoicing - in response to so many peoples' injuries.

My mother got wind of the talk among the villagers, so she decided to lay low. She also got a message that I needed additional funds. She scraped together all her meager savings and was able to get hold of seven small pieces of gold to send to me. I was still far away, and there were concerns that a courier might steal whatever was sent, so she hatched a plan.

She met a wandering yogi who was headed to the region where I was

studying. She invited him in for a meal, and while he relaxed at her table, she secretly took his heavy coat and placed the pieces of gold into a hidden pocket on the inside. Over the pocket she placed a patch of black cloth upon which she embroidered seven 'stars' with white thread. She then gave directions to the yogi on how to find me, and handed him a sealed letter to give to me.

After the wanderer left, my mother concocted another letter and pretended that the wandering yogi had given it to her with a message from me. It read as follows: "Dear mother, I hope you and Peta are in good health. Doubtless by now you will have seen the profound effects of the black magic I've mastered. If any surviving villagers threaten you or Peta with harm or retribution, be sure to write down their names and send the note to me. It will then be easy for me to invoke spells to harm them and their families down to the ninth generation." My mother then fastened the fake letter to a post in the middle of the village - for all to see.

A while later, the wandering yogi arrived at the magician's lair where I was staying. He gave me the sealed letter from my mother. I opened and read it. The letter described the details of the destruction that had taken place at our village - and how there were still many villagers who swore vengeance against our little family. In order to avert such harm against us, she advised that I enact incantations that would cause a ravaging hailstorm to rain down on the villagers' fields as high as the ninth course of bricks.

She went on to write, "if your provisions are exhausted, look to the region facing north where, against a black cloud, the constellation Pleiades appears. Beneath it you will find the seven houses of your cousins and the provisions you need. If you do not understand this part of the note, ask the wandering yogi who bears brings it to you. He has the cover you'll need to find your provisions."

I showed that cryptic part of the note to my master and none of us could figure out what it meant. The master's wife became curious and asked to see the note. She read it and then called for the yogi. When he arrived, she stoked the fire and gave him some beer. When he relaxed, she removed his coat and playfully put it on herself, saying, "This is a nice heavy coat for wandering the frigid slopes of these hills and valleys." She walked up to the terrace, took the coat off, examined it then went to get a knife. She loosened the black patch on its inside lining and removed the seven gold pieces. She then got a needle and thread and re-sewed the patch as before - then went back downstairs and placed the coat on the traveler's chair.

A short while later, she gave me the gold, and I asked her why she was doing that. She replied, "Fortuitous, you have a very crafty mother. She sewed that gold in to the yogi's jacket in order to get it to you without him knowing it. The last part of your mother's letter says, 'if you do not understand this part of the note, ask the wandering yogi who bears this note. He has the cover you'll need to find your provisions.'

The 'cover' refers to the coat that he wears. At the start of the note, she refers to, 'a region facing north,' which alludes to a place where the sun doesn't shine, in other words, the inside of the cloak. She then writes, 'look to the region facing north where, against a black cloud, the constellation Pleiades appears.' The black cloud refers to the black cloth which was used as a patch, and the seven white embroidered stars are the seven stars of Pleiades. She then writes, 'beneath it you will find the seven houses of your cousins and the provisions you need,' which alludes to the seven pieces of gold which were hidden under the

patch.”

The master magician overheard his wife’s explanation and let out a hearty laugh while declaring, “They say women are full of guile, and it’s certainly true.” We all shared in his mirth.

Thus ends Chapter One.

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