

The Life of Lord Marpa

From the *Lives of Lord Marpa and Jetsün Milarepa*

By Gampopa Sonam Rinchen (1079-1153)

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The one who became [Nāropa's] spiritual heir was Marpa Lotsawa. When he was young, he liked to get into fights with everyone. His father, becoming certain that he would either kill somebody or that somebody would kill him, felt that he might possibly learn something from being sent off to study. After sending many valuables, he sent [Marpa] to Drogmi Lotsawa. There, having offered Drogmi a horse, [Marpa] listened to the dharma. Having developed stability in the dharma of Drogmi Lotsawa, he left for Nepal.

He listened to the teachings of the Nepali Chitherpa. At this time all the Nepalis were going to India to hear the dharma. Thinking “why shouldn't I go?” [Marpa] travelled to India. There he first met the Gurus Pentapa and Karmaca. Having done so, he followed them for three years. Then, he traveled north to Tibet up to the gold mines. Having done so, he offered Pentapa three *srang* of gold.¹ [Pentapa] was extremely pleased and said, “I have a Guru named Nāropa. You should take this and deliver it to him in Vikramalaśīla.”

Then, it was said that [Marpa] received dharma teachings from Nāropa, Maitripa, and others. Regarding [Marpa's] qualities, it is said that during the six years he stayed with Nāropa, he did not upset him once. As for the sign of [Marpa's] accumulated merit, his meeting with Nāropa alone sufficiently [exemplifies this]. Then, he practiced all the pith instructions of the explanatory tantras and the accomplishment tantras.

Having done so, on his way back to Tibet, he gave a few teachings on the roadside. In central Tibet, Marpa Goyak offered [Marpa Lotsawa] ten *srang* of gold and requested the dharma. Then, while crossing a lake in Nub² [west of Central Tibet], all of [Marpa's] short notes on pith instructions were lost in the water. Alternatively, it has been said that Nyö

¹ A (Tib.) *srang* is a unit of measure. It is equivalent to ten (Tib.) *zho*. A *zho* is half the weight of one Indian (Skt.) *tolaka*. One (Skt.) *tolaka* or (Hindi) *tola* is more or less equivalent to 11.5 grams, which was the rough weight of 100 ratti (*Abrus precatorius*) seeds. Thus, a Tibetan *srang* would have been roughly equivalent to 57.5 grams.

² In all four versions of this text that I have found, there is the word *bsnubs*, which makes little sense in the context of the story. The place name *gnubs*, often mis-spelled *bsnubs*, makes a lot more sense.

Lotsawa, having given rise to jealousy, threw [the notes] into the Ganges river.³ Having returned, [Marpa] set out to find his Guru.

Since the Guru had gone into the forests, [Marpa] did not find him. In the end, when Marpa did find him, [Nāropa] was not speaking, and thus did not grant [Marpa any teachings]. As the Guru was not teaching the dharma, he had also abandoned all material objects and didn't carry anything, but a single skull cup. [Nāropa] merely acted as the master of gaṇacakras and bestowed blessings. Since Guru Marpa was an old disciple of his, [Nāropa] gave him his skull cup. There [Marpa] stayed for two years, again and again offering requests [for the dharma]. After that, he was given [teachings] even more subtle than before.

Then, he traveled back to Lhodrag. Metön Tshönpo of Tsang Rong offered Marpa six *dre* filled with wealth and requested the dharma. When Geshe Zhungpa was dwelling with Geshe Gyerchungwa and bestowing upon him Nyingma secret mantra teachings, Geshe Gyerchungwa heard the story of the southern Guru [Marpa]. He then told Ngog that both of them were going to go to [Marpa] to hear dharma teachings. Thus, the master and his attendants, a group of five, went to Lhodrag. They offered Guru Marpa a horse. The Guru joked with them, saying “If this horse of yours is a present, it is great! If it is an offering, it is small!”

There, they received the dharma. Understanding that the instructions were extremely great, Metshön even gave up being a monk and then asked [Marpa] to come to Tsang. Marpa Lhodragpa understood that he should go up [to Tsang]. Concerning his thoughts on leaving,

³ The subtlety of Gampopa's phrasing here is significant. With the first statement that Marpa lost his notes while crossing the lake there is no qualification at the end. With the second statement that Nyö Lotsawa threw them into the river out of jealousy it is qualified at the end with “is an alternative saying that exists” (*zer ba yang yod*). In this way, I read that Gampopa's tone casts doubt on the latter version of the story. Also, it is significant that Gampopa has already placed Marpa back in Tibet and interrupts this narrative with an alternate story about what might have happened earlier back in India.

he said “I, myself, also have two weary parents in Tsang. Since the dharma leaves and stays, and since I have stayed, your request for me to go is acceptable.”

Traveling there, he was offered seventy female yaks, one yak hair tent, one dog, together with one porcelain bowl. Then, later on, some servants also offered him one hundred sheep at once. Eighty volumes of the scriptures headed by the Avatamsaka sutras were offered. Having received all those offerings, the Guru bestowed the dharma of the *Catuḥpitha*, *Mahāmāyā*, *Vajrapañjara*, *Hevajra*, and others. Not only that, but the highest classes of people offered their services and then requested the dharma. Thus, it is said that instructions were bestowed upon them.

Then at one time, when all the disciples had gathered, they went into one house. Having blocked all the windows, [Marpa] transferred his consciousness into a dead pigeon, which then flew around. Also, at one time, there was a yak that had died from skin ulcers. The Guru transferred [his consciousness] from his mouth into the dead yak's. The yak circled him once, keeled over, and then [his consciousness] was transferred back. It was also said that the Guru grabbed a tattered sheep's carcass, entered it [with his consciousness], and conveyed it to an open plain. He put his hand print in the nine-storied tower and he raised multiple rocks [in the air]. The great translator appeared to be not meditating at all times, nevertheless, at all times he did not become distracted from meditative absorption. He had seen the truth of dharmatā. He dwelled as an emanation.