

A TIBETAN LIBERATION TALE ILLUSTRATED IN PRINT AND MANUSCRIPT

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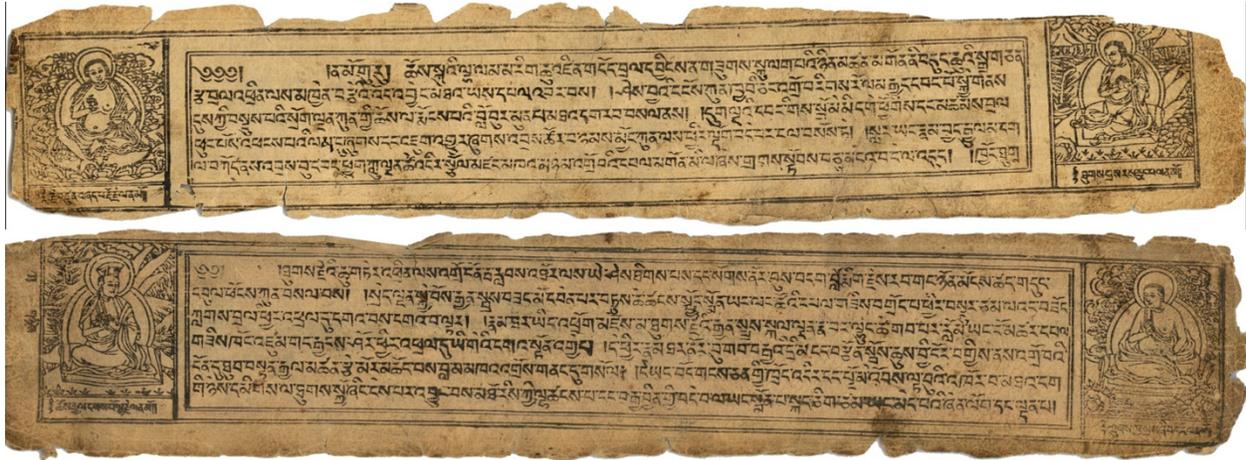


Fig. 1 First two folios from *The Life of Milarepa*; Ron Wosel Puk, Tibet; 1538; xylographic print on paper; each approx. 3-1/8 × 17¼ in. (8 × 44 cm); after *A Brief Survey of the Evolution of Tibetan Printing Technology* (Bod kyi shing spar lag rtsal gyi byung rim mdor bsodus), Bod ljongs bod yig dpe rnying dpe skrun khang, 2013

EARLIEST EXTANT PRINTED EDITION OF MILAREPA'S LIFE STORY

Ron Wosel Puk, Gungtang, Southwest Tibet
1538

SUMMARY

Tibetologist Andrew Quintman introduces Mila, the cotton-clad yogi, an eleventh-century hermit, poet, and Tibetan cultural hero. Accounts of Milarepa's dramatic life story of using black magic for revenge, followed by total renunciation, religious perseverance, awakening, and teaching through song, established a model for an exemplary spiritual life across the Himalayan world. Mila's biography spread as woodblock printed books such as this illustrated print, which combines text and image in this early mass-media technology.

Few religious figures have left as indelible a mark on the landscapes of Himalayan religion as Milarepa (ca. 1028–1111), the eleventh-century Tibetan saint acclaimed for his prowess in meditation and his poetic expressions of spiritual attainment.¹ The stories of his life, together with those describing the activities of the Indian tantric master Padmasambhava (ca. eighth century), transformed the contours of Buddhist practice, literature, and geography on both sides of the Himalayas. While accounts of Milarepa's deeds proliferated in the centuries after his death, the best-known version appeared only in the late fifteenth century through the compositions of Tsangnyon Heruka (1452–1507), the so-called Madman of Tsang (fig. 2). These singular works, known as *The Life of Milarepa* and *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*, describe the yogin's childhood crimes of revenge, his repentance and search for a Buddhist master, his renunciation and solitary meditation retreats, and his eventual awakening and teaching through song. Together, these texts established a model for an exemplary spiritual life across the Himalayan world, one that emphasized devotion to the guru, dedication to solitary meditation, and perseverance through adversity. "Mi la" was his clan name; "repa" refers to the cotton robe worn by meditators in the high Himalayan region. The very name Milarepa thus marks his status as a religious virtuoso. *The Life of Milarepa* remains one of Tibet's most beloved narratives and arguably its most famous book.



Fig. 2 Tsangnyon Heruka (1452–1507); Tibet, 16th century; gilt metalwork with semiprecious stone inlay; 43 × 31 × 30 in. (109.2 × 78.7 × 76.2 cm); Pritzker Collection, Chicago; photograph by Hugh DuBois, courtesy of the Pritzker Collection, Chicago

The stories of Milarepa’s life record a tale of human pathos, transgression, transformation, and accomplishment on a grand scale. He was born to a wealthy family in the border region of Mangyul Gungtang on the cusp of a Buddhist renaissance in Tibet. His father died suddenly while Milarepa was still a child, leading a greedy aunt and uncle to steal his rightful patrimony, and thrusting the child, together with his mother and sister, into a life of poverty and servitude. At his mother’s behest, Milarepa sought teachers of hail-casting and black magic in order to exact revenge on their avaricious relatives. His success in these pursuits led to the desolation of his ancestral village and the murder of more than three dozen people. Milarepa came to recognize the weight of his misdeeds, leading him to pursue Buddhist instruction and practice under the guidance of the acclaimed translator Marpa Chokyi Lodro (ca. 1012–1097). This guru, known equally for his great learning and short temper, subjected Milarepa to intense physical trials, such as constructing immense stone towers. Such activities were later revealed to be a

method for purifying his past negative deeds. Milarepa eventually dedicated himself to extended meditation retreats and spent the remainder of his life wandering among solitary locations, teaching small groups of disciples through the medium of spiritual poems and songs of realization. Details of these encounters constitute *The Hundred Thousand Songs*.

Editions of the *Life and Songs of Milarepa* spread widely as both manuscripts and xylographic prints made from engraved woodblocks. Influential Mahayana Buddhist works such as the Lotus Sutra extoll the benefits of reproducing sacred texts, and this sentiment is echoed in the closing lines of *Life of Milarepa*:

Seeing the Life, one is freed from the eight worldly concerns.

May it serve a feast for renunciates who've relinquished attachments.

Hearing the Life, faith arises all on its own.

May it serve a feast for the fortunate endowed with good karma.

Recollecting the Life, entanglements are forcefully severed.

May it serve a feast for the omniscient, accomplished in this life.

Touching the Life, the two aims are spontaneously achieved.

May it serve a feast for doctrine holders who benefit beings.

Preserving the Life, the intent of the lineage is realized.

May it serve a feast for lineage holders who practice their master's command.²

PRINT EDITIONS OF MILAREPA'S LIFE

Woodblock printing originated in China during the seventh century, and by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the first printed Tibetan materials had begun to appear in Khara Khoto, Turfan, and eventually Beijing and elsewhere.³

Yet, when Tsangnyon Heruka prepared the first xylographic edition of Milarepa's life in the late fifteenth century, print technology was still relatively new in central Tibet. Such projects were often major economic enterprises, requiring massive investments of capital, labor, and raw materials such as wood, paper, and ink. Tsangnyon Heruka overcame such obstacles with great difficulty, and his work represents a major innovation for the literary tradition of Milarepa's life.⁴ For the first time, the narratives could be printed and disseminated in large quantities at relatively high speed. The combination of broad patronage and rapid and widespread distribution led, in part, to the ubiquity of his accounts.

The original xylograph edition has not yet come to light. The folios here present the first two pages from the earliest extant print edition of *The Life of Milarepa*, from Wosel Puk, a site associated with Milarepa's acclaimed disciple Rechungpa (1085–1161) near the village of Ron in the Gungtang Valley (fig. 3). This version was prepared under the direction of the Madman's disciple Tokden Chokyi Gyatso (sixteenth century). A print of the companion volume of the *Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa* was completed several years later.⁵



Fig. 3 View of Gungtang, Tibet; photograph by Andrew Quintman, 1998

As is common in many block-print editions, the text opens with illustrations in the left and right margins depicting the lineage of disciples descending from Milarepa, together with a short prayer of homage. In the upper left is Milarepa, identified by his honorific title and tantric initiation name Jetsun Zhepa Dorje. The images continue with the “heart disciple” Rechungpa (upper right), the Doctor from Dakpo (Dakpo Lhaje), better known as Gampopa (1079–1153) (lower left), and heart disciple Zhiwa Wo (lower right). All four figures are depicted in the gesture of teaching. Milarepa, Rechungpa, and Zhiwa Wo each wear the simple robe and meditation belt of an ascetic yogin, while Gampopa appears in more formal robes, reflecting his former status as an ordained Buddhist monk. Milarepa’s two principal disciples—Gampopa and Rechungpa—are seated before the mountain peaks that served as preferred retreat locations for Milarepa’s followers. The text concludes with two dharma protectors, four-armed Mahakala and Remati (fig. 4), who remain closely associated with the Kagyu tradition that stemmed from Milarepa. Representations of Milarepa in this fashion, seated with hands in the gestures of meditation or teaching, were common in early depictions, such as the painting in Sekar Gutok (fig. 5), perhaps the earliest extant mural portrait of Milarepa, preserved in the tower he famously constructed at

his guru's command. Here, he is seated on a lotus throne, draped in the white cotton robe of an ascetic meditator, his hands in the gestures of teaching and touching the earth.



Fig. 4 Four-armed Mahakala, left, and Remati, right; Ron Wosel Puk, Tibet; 1538; xylographic print on paper; approx. 3 1/8 × 17¼ in. (8 × 44 cm); after *A Brief Survey of the Evolution of Tibetan Printing Technology* (Bod kyi shing spar lag rtsal gyi byung rim msdor bsodus), Bod ljongs bod yig dpe rnying dpe skrun khang, 2013

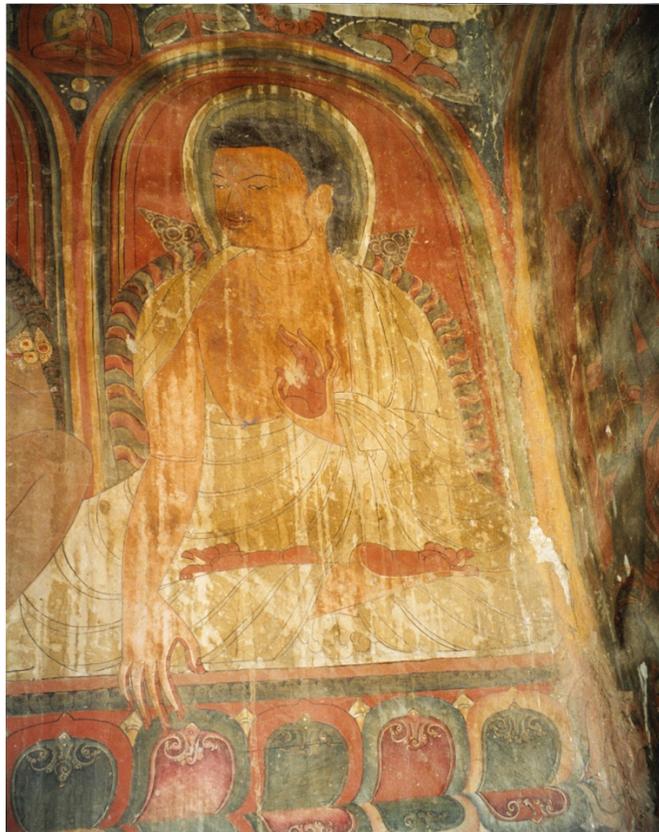


Fig. 5 Milarepa (ca. 1028–1111); “Milarepa’s Tower,” Sekar Gutok, Lhodrak, southern Tibet; 1200–1250; color pigments on substrate; approx. 30 × 48 in. (76.2 × 122 cm); photograph by Andrew Quintman, 1994

We might compare these depictions to those found in another reprint edition of Milarepa’s *Life and Songs*, produced about a decade and a half later (between 1550 and 1555) by the Madman’s disciple Lhatsun Rinchen Namgyel (1473–1557). These were prepared at the hermitage known

as Drakkar Taso (White Rock Horse Tooth), situated high above the river valley in the Mangyul Gungtang Corridor (fig. 6). This site began as one of Milarepa's primary retreats, where he famously turned green from eating nothing but nettle porridge for many years. Drakkar Taso would become a small but influential monastery (and later, a nunnery) together with a printery. The Drakkar Taso print edition of the *Hundred Thousand Songs* depicts Milarepa in a new way, forming what would become the yogin's most recognizable posture: legs loosely crossed, left hand in his lap holding a skull cup, and holding his right hand to his ear in a gesture of singing (fig. 7).⁶ (A print edition from ten years earlier produced at Lande Langpuk to the south of Drakkar Taso depicts Milarepa with this singing gesture, but in this depiction he holds his left hand aloft (fig. 8).



Fig. 6 Drakkar Taso (White Rock Horse Tooth) Monastery and Printing Blocks; Mangyul Gungtang Corridor, southwest Tibet; photograph by Andrew Quintman, 2007

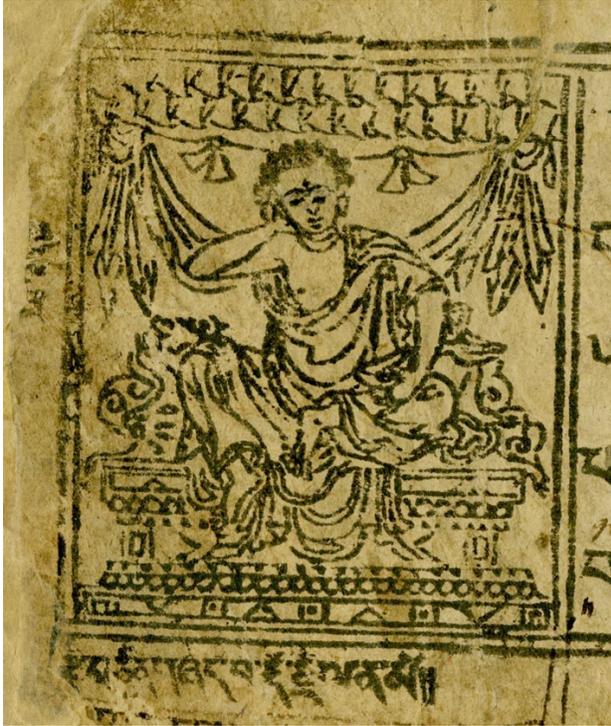


Fig. 7 First Folio from the *Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*, and detail with Milarepa; Drakkar Taso; 1550–1555; xylographic print on paper; folio 4-1/8 × 20 in. (10.5 × 51 cm); British Library; OPB 19999a3

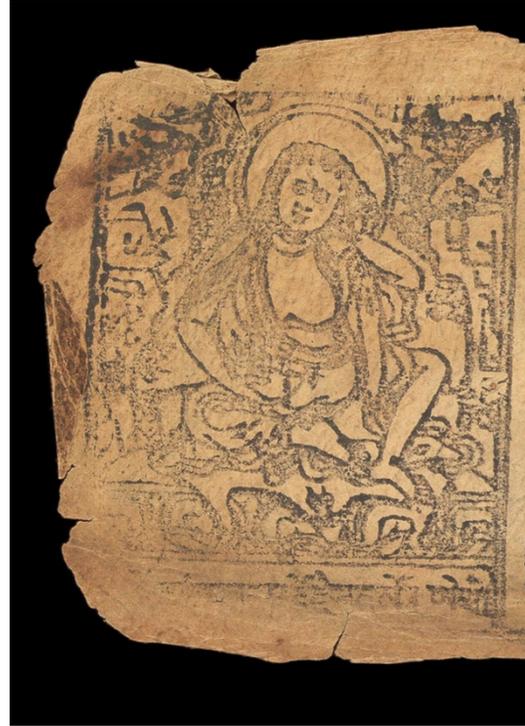


Fig. 8 First Folio from the *Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*, and detail with Milarepa; Lende Lang Puk; 1540; xylographic print on paper; folio 3½ × 19 in. (9 × 48.3 cm); Wellcome Collection, London; image courtesy Wellcome Institute, Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

Depictions of this classic hand-to-ear gesture are not witnessed prior to Tsangnyon Heruka’s publication, and the Madman likely played a role in disseminating it for the first time. In the centuries that followed, however, this would become a distinguishing and widely recognized feature of Milarepa’s iconography, replicated in text illustrations, scroll paintings, murals, and statues (fig. 9).



Fig. 9 Milarepa (1040–1123) Meditating in a Mountain Kagyu Order; 18th century; clay, wood, colors; 10 × 13 × 6 in. (25.4 × 33 × 15.2 cm); The Newark Museum of Art; 2009.3 A,B; Purchase 2009 Helen McMahon Brady Cutting Fund; photograph courtesy of The Newark Museum of Art

MILAREPA IN ILLUSTRATED MANUSCRIPTS

New xylographic editions of Milarepa's *Life* and *Songs* multiplied in the centuries that followed, with woodblock sets carved at nearly two dozen sites spanning western, central, and eastern Tibet, as well as Bhutan and Beijing. Although printed versions of these works would predominate, a culture of manuscript production continued to thrive. Some manuscripts were copies of the Madman's print undertaken as a pious act of merit-making. Others preserved works that predate Tsangnyon Heruka's version, and these were frequently illustrated with vignettes of Milarepa's activities and his disciples. The most widely illustrated Milarepa manuscripts belong to a cycle of texts informally known as the Black Treasury, named after a temple and repository built by the Karmapas in southern Tibet.⁷ In one version, Milarepa is seated before his guru Marpa the Translator as he recounts a prophetic vision known as the Dream of the Four Pillars (figs. 10 and 11). A manuscript copy of the so-called *Twelve Great Disciples*, among the earliest Black Treasury texts, takes a different approach to illustrating Milarepa's life. Here, characters

from the story move across and through the text, creating an integrated textual and visual narrative (figs. 12, 13, 14, and 15).



Fig. 10 The Black Treasury Manuscript, Dream of the Four Pillars; Tibet; 16th century; ink and colored pigment on paper; each 4-3/8 x 17 1/4 in. (8 x 42.5 cm); Tibet Museum/Fondation Alan Bordier, Gruyères, Switzerland; ABS 039



Fig. 11 The Black Treasury Manuscript, Dream of the Four Pillars; Tibet; 16th century; ink and colored pigment on paper; each 4-3/8 x 17 1/4 in. (8 x 42.5 cm); Tibet Museum/Fondation Alan Bordier, Gruyères, Switzerland; ABS 039



Fig. 12 Folios from a Biography of Milarepa; Tibet; 17th–18th century; ink on colors on paper; each 4 x 23 in. (10.2 x 58.4 cm); Newark Museum of Art; Purchase 1936 Carter D. Holton Collection; 36.280.1.1–245; photograph courtesy The Newark Museum of Art



Fig. 13 Folios from a Biography of Milarepa; Tibet; 17th–18th century; ink on colors on paper; each 4 x 23 in. (10.2 x 58.4 cm); Newark Museum of Art; Purchase 1936 Carter D. Holton Collection; 36.280.1.1–245; photograph courtesy The Newark Museum of Art



Fig. 14 Folios from a Biography of Milarepa; Tibet; 17th–18th century; ink on colors on paper; each 4 x 23 in. (10.2 x 58.4 cm); Newark Museum of Art; Purchase 1936 Carter D. Holton Collection; 36.280.1.1–245; photograph courtesy The Newark Museum of Art



Fig. 15 Folios from a Biography of Milarepa; Tibet; 17th–18th century; ink on colors on paper; each 4 x 23 in. (10.2 x 58.4 cm); Newark Museum of Art; Purchase 1936 Carter D. Holton Collection; 36.280.1.1–245; photograph courtesy The Newark Museum of A

FOOTNOTES

¹ Determining firm dates for Milarepa's birth and death has proved a vexing issue for both premodern Tibetan authors and contemporary scholars of Tibet. The dates used in this essay (1028–1111) follow prominent scholars of Milarepa's own Kagyu tradition, such as Situ Panchen Chokyi Jungne (1700–1774) and Katok Rigzin Tsewang Norbu (1698–1775). For an analysis of the complexities of Milarepa's dates, see Andrew Quintman, trans., "Wrinkles in Time: On the Vagaries of Mi La Ras Pa's Dates," *Acta Orientalia* 74 (2013): 3–26.

² Milarepa, quoted in Andrew Quintman, trans., *The Life of Milarepa* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2010), 233–34.

³ On the history, materials, techniques, and economics of woodblock printing in Tibet, see Dungkar Lobzang Trinlé and Tsering Dhundup Gonkatsang, "Tibetan Woodblock Printing: An Ancient Art and Craft," *Himalaya* 36, no. 1 (2014): 163–77; Agnieszka Helman-Ważny, *The Archaeology of Tibetan Books*, Brill's Tibetan Studies Library 36 (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Hildegard Diemberger, Franz-Karl Ehrhard, and Peter F. Kornicki, eds., *Tibetan Printing: Comparisons, Continuities, and Change*, Brill's Tibetan Studies Library 39 (Leiden: Brill, 2016). For a survey of Tibetan book culture more broadly, see Kurtis R. Schaeffer, *The Culture of the Book in Tibet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

⁴ On the creation of the first xylographic edition of the Life and Songs, see Andrew Quintman, trans., *The Yogin and the Madman: Reading the Biographical Corpus of Tibet's Great Saint Milarepa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), esp. 125–34.

⁵ See Marta Sernesi, "A Continuous Stream of Merit: The Early Reprints of GTsang Smyon Heruka's Hagiographical Works," *Zentral-Asiatische Studien* 40 (2011): 179–237; Franz-Karl Ehrhard and Marta Sernesi, "Apropos a Recent Collection of Tibetan Xylographs from the 15th to the 17th Centuries," in *Perspectives on Tibetan Culture: A Small Garland of Forget-Me-Not's Offered to Elena De Rossi Filibeck*, ed. Michela Clemente, Oscar Nalesini, and Federica Venturi (Paris: Centre de recherche sur les civilisations de l'Asie orientale, 2019), 119–40.

⁶ Some interesting discrepancies in this first folio appear in the Drakkar Taso print held at the British Library (OPB 19999a3) and the one microfilmed by the Nepal German Manuscript Preservation Project (NGMPP Reel nos. L250/8–L251/1). These require further investigation.

⁷ On the Black Treasury text tradition, see Andrew Quintman, trans., *The Yogin and the Madman: Reading the Biographical Corpus of Tibet's Great Saint Milarepa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), esp. chap. 3.

FURTHER READING

Quintman, Andrew, trans. 2010. *The Life of Milarepa*. New York: Penguin Classics.

Quintman, Andrew. 2014b. *The Yogin and the Madman: Reading the Biographical Corpus of Tibet's Great Saint Milarepa*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Stagg, Christopher, trans. 2016. *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*. Boulder, CO: Shambhala.

CITATION

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