

# THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF MARPA CHOKYI LODRO TO KAGYU SCHOOL OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM

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## Abstract

It is not possible to present the detail contributions of Marpa in one paper. The purpose of writing this paper is to present the nucleus contributions of Marpa Chokyi Lodro to Buddhism in general and Tibetan Buddhism in particular. Tibetan Buddhism is playing a significant role in propagating the teachings of the Buddha. There are several savants who brought Buddhism to Tibet from India, China etc. Marpa Chokyi Lodro was one of the main figures among these masters. He was the key figure in propagating Buddha Dharma. Without him we would not be able to know about Milarepa and afterwards his stream of lineage. He had been a great inspiration for hundreds of people who searched for Buddhism and travelled thousands of miles. Despite immense hardships he travelled three times to India. He was not only a scholar but also a practical person. In the history of Tibetan literature, he is known as the 'Great Translator'. Along with many translations of Sanskrit text into Tibetan, his contributions in translating '*Kagyur*' and '*Tengyur*' from Sanskrit to Tibetan are remarkable. He is also known as the preliminary founder of Kagyu tradition in Tibet. This great saint Marpa is remarkably known as the guru of the Great Yogi Milarepa. It will be also our effort to throw some light on how he travelled several times to India. To understand whom he met in India, the teachings of transmission and empowerment he brought to Tibet and how he led a sorcery practitioner (*Milarepa*) to enlightenment.

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## Introduction

Marpa Chokyi Lodro, popularly known as Marpa Lotsawa (Translator), a Tibetan Buddhist, came to India in the 11<sup>th</sup> century C.E. and received several esoteric teachings of Gautama Buddha from many renowned Indian Mahasiddhas, such as Naropa, Maitripa, Niguma, Kukuripa, Jnangarbha and so on. Among these siddhas, Mahasiddha Naropa was known to be the principal guru of Marpa. Marpa was born in Lhodrak Tibet. He is popularly known as the Translator Marpa. He was born to Marpa Wangchuk Oser and Gyamo Sa Dode.<sup>1</sup> His childhood name was Tarma Wangchuk, at the age of twelve he was sent to a local teacher; he gave him the name Chokyi Lodro. He was a sharp minded child, at the same time he was an aggressive person and very fond of fighting. His parents decided to send him little far from home and sent to Drogmi Shakya Ishey. Marpa learned literal Sanskrit and colloquial language under the guidance of Dogmi Shakya Yeshe, who was then a very famous teacher who just returned from India. Marpa travelled to India thrice, met Naropa and learned several teachings from him. Marpa belongs to the Kagyu School of Tibetan Buddhism which gives emphasis particularly to Tantric and yoga practices like *Mahamudra* (Great Seal). Through Marpa this School is directly linked with Naropa (Indian Mahasiddha).<sup>2</sup>

### Marpa's Principal Guru (Naropa 1016-1100)

Naropa, one among the 84 Indian Mahasiddhas, spent his early life in monastery and learned all the basics of Buddhism in Nalanda Mahavihara. Later, he became one of the best scholars of the institution and also appointed as the northern gatekeeper, which was the symbol of a learned scholar. He also served as the Vice-Chancellor of the Nalanda Mahavihara. After learning all the education, he was not satisfied yet and set out to find a guru who will teach the true meaning of the word. He met with Tilopa who became his principal guru and received empowerment and several instructions. Naropa became the principal disciple of Tilopa, but this fortune does not come to him easily. He had to go through 12 major and 12 minor hardships to achieve the esoteric teachings from Tilopa. After the accomplishment of all the hardships he got several transmissions and numerous esoteric teachings from Tilopa. The popular teachings

are the Six Doctrines, later it became popularly known as *NaroChos drug*, the Six Doctrines of Naropa. He passed all these transmission to Marpa, who came all the way from Tibet and became the principal disciple of Naropa.

### Marpa's First Visit to India

The great translator Marpa set out for India with Nyo Lotsawa, who was also a translator and came to India to learn the teachings of Gautama Buddha. Marpa travelled with Nyo as his servant. First, they reached Nepal and stayed there for three years. To acclimatize the heat of mainland India, Nepal was the perfect place for travelers from Tibet to rest. In Nepal, Marpa and Nyo met with two disciples of Naropa named Chitherpa and Paindapa.<sup>3</sup> Marpa got an invaluable hint and advices from these two disciples of Naropa. After three years of stay in Nepal, both Marpa and his companion Nyo travelled to India. Marpa departed with Nyo and went in search of Naropa. In India both travellers met several times and they use to compare their knowledge of understanding learned from respective gurus. Each time Marpa showed to be more learned.

### Teachings or Transmissions received by Marpa

#### *Hevajra, Guhyasamaja and Mahamaya*

Marpa met Naropa for the first time at Pullahari. Upon meeting the glorious Mahasiddha Naropa, Marpa offered many prostrations including flowers and some gold. Naropa said,

*In accordance with the guru's prophecy,  
My son, the worthy vessel MarpaLodro,  
From the northern Land of Snow,  
Is welcome to assume the regency.*<sup>4</sup>

The first abhisheka from Naropa received by Marpa was the abhisheka of *Sri Hevajra* and the second section of the *Hevajra-tantra* and completed this with the *Vajrapanjara* and the *Samputa*. He studied these teachings for a year. After that, Marpa received the abhisheka and instructions on the *Guhyasamaja tantra* from Jnangarbha and on *Mahamaya tantra* from Kukkuripa. *Guhyasamaja* and *Mahamaya* are the name of *Yidam*. Naropa was able to give Marpa the teachings on *Guhyasamaja tantra* and *Mahamaya*. But still he sent Marpa to Jnangarbha and Kukkuripa, because he knew that these two gurus

are the pure source of Guhyasamaja and Mahamaya. Later, Marpa received these teachings from Naropa and found them the same in essence as what he had already received.

### *Dohas and Mahamudra*

*Maitriapa*: The Second main guru of Marpa. Marpa received the tradition of *Dohas* and *Mahamudra* from Maitriapa. The Vajrayana practice of singing spontaneous songs of experience and realization are known as dohas. Mahamudra is the most important teaching in Kagyu lineage, which means ‘great symbol, seal or gesture.’ Marpa also visited Enigma, a female Vajrayana master during the time of Naropa and it is also said that she was a wife of Naropa; later she became a great practitioner and one of the principal disciples of Naropa. After receiving all these teachings and transmissions, Marpa went back to Tibet. The great translator Marpa had also received the instructions and empowerments on the *kriya tantra* and the *yoga tantra* from Yeshe Nyingpo.<sup>5</sup>

### Second visit to India

Marpa was married and began to have children when he started his second journey to India. The second time he took fifty *Thals* of gold. The reason behind his second travel was that he could not carry any materials of teachings and instructions he got from India. His fellow traveler drowned all his staff into the water while travelling back to Tibet. He was left with merely the teachings and instructions that were memorized. Therefore, he felt that he had to go back once again to acquire all the copies of these texts and learn some more from the great Indian yogis in addition. Marpa visited all his previous teachers and once again received all the teachings and empowerments and clarifies all doubts. He also received some more teachings in additions from Naropa, one of these was *Dakinivajrapanjara* tantra which is a special tantra that provides an explanation of the Hevajra tantra. He then received the *Samputa* tantra which provides a general explanation for all the other tantras.

When Marpa was about to leave for Tibet once again, Naropa sang a very strange spiritual song:

*‘There is a man who is a flower in the sky and there is a  
son of a barren women riding a horse who has whip  
made of the hairs of a tortoise. She has a dagger which  
is made of a rabbit’s horn and she kills the enemy within*

*the true nature. At the moment of this killing, the dumb can speak and the blind can see and the deaf can hear and the lame can run and jump about and the sun and moon is dancing'.<sup>6</sup>*

Naropa sang this song to Marpa indicating you should come again to India. At that time Marpa did not understand the full meaning of that song. His principal disciple Milarepa saw a dream and he narrated it to his guru Marpa. It was only after that moment Marpa decoded the meaning of song and he had to visit India once again.

### Third visit to India

Because of his age, his family and friends tried to hold him back, but his promise to his guru was adamant, he says I would rather end my life than break a promise to his teacher. This time it was very difficult for Marpa to meet Naropa. Because, he had 'entered the action' (Tib. *spyod-pa la gshegs-pa*). Entering the action is an advance stage of Vajrayana practice. During the third visit to India, Marpa faced many obstacles to have a glimpse of Naropa. It was only because Marpa have to purify some karmic actions, later on the day comes when he met Naropa. This time he was fortunate enough that he received the abhiseka and oral instructions of Cakarasamvara of Dakini hearing lineage. Naropa gave a strict prophecy or command that this teaching should be passed only to Milarepa. There is a monastery named Phugtal in Zangskar where, he stayed and meditated during his third visit to India.

There are two lineages of teachings received by Marpa; the first lineage is the teachings and transmission like four special transmissions such as: Practice of Illusory Body (Tib. *S Gyulus*) and Transference (Tib. *Phowa*), Practice of Dreaming (Tib. *rMi-Lam*), Practice of Clear Light (Tib. *Od-gSal*), Practice of Inner Heat (Tib. *gTummo*), came from Vajradhara to Tilopa and to Naropa, which later becomes popular as Six Yogas of Naropa. Another lineage is also originated from Vajradhara, but then passed down through Ratnamati, Saraha, Nagarjuna and Savaripa, and then he passed on to Maitripa. Marpa was also one of the main disciples of Maitripa from whom he received the empowerment and teaching of Mahamudra (Great Seal) and the tradition of Doha. Doha is the tradition of passing and teachings from Guru to disciple by Singing or in the form of Songs. It is the practice of Vajrayana tradition of singing unplanned songs of experience and realization. Marpa received Ghuyasamaja Tantra from Jnanagarbha and Mahamaya

Tantra from Kukkuripa. The great translator received *Naro-Chos-drug* (Six Yogas of Naropa) from Naropa. Marpa also visited Niguma at the instruction of Naropa and received many teachings. It was after Marpa's second trip to India when he met Milarepa. Marpa put him under several difficult trails to purify his previous evil deeds and make him a worthy vessel for the teachings. It is said that the reason behind Marpa's third trip to India to meet Naropa was Milarepa, who saw an auspicious dream and to seek the meaning of that dream he travelled to India for the third time. Now Marpa became a renowned teacher in Tibet. He has many disciples, among them, his principal disciples were 1. Milarepa, 2. Ngok Choku Dorje, 3. Tsurton Wangi Dorje and 4. Meton Tsonpo. Later they became popular in whole Tibet as (*Ka-Chen-Zhi*) the Four Great Pillars.<sup>7</sup> He has translated many Buddhists Sanskrit texts that he had brought from India. He has also contributed his translations works in many parts of Kangyur and Tengyur in Tibet.

The lineage of Marpa Lotsawa is still alive and practicing in many countries. His teachings are still popularly practicing in Ladakh, Bhutan and Tibet etc. by Karma Kagyu, Drikung Kagyu, Drukpa Kagyu, Taklung Kagyu and so on<sup>8</sup>. The impacts of teachings like *Mahamudra* and *Six Yogas of Naropa* are tremendous upon the people of present time. Be it philosophically or practically, these teachings are of great benefit to both follower and non-follower of Buddhism.

Naropa once gave a prediction to Marpa that your lineage will not carry by your blood line. As per the prophesy, he lost his son Dharma Dode quite early. From that moment his attention was on Milarepa to be his lineage holder.<sup>9</sup>

### Milarepa (Disciple of Marpa)

The history of Tibetan Buddhism is incomplete without the mention of Milarepa, special in case of his teacher Marpa. The great translator Marpa was popularly known as the teacher of Milarepa. The importance of Guru and disciple relationship is mentioned by Milarepa himself as praising his guru, "You are kind to me and I am also kind to you".<sup>10</sup> After committing sorcery in his village (*Gungthang*), he has developed great sense of regret and set out to practice Buddhism. He met with Marpa and lived with him about more than six years. Marpa was competent to observe Milarepa's potential, but knew that the youthful man would have to process his penitence and ambiguity before beginning his time as a student of the dharma. In order to direct him to a place of attentiveness, Marpa set Milarepa to his legendary assignment of building, destroying, and rebuilding

stone towers. This course was intended “to purify the negativity of his past actions, so that Milarepa could begin his studies with fewer obstacles.”

Marpa’s challenge pushed Milarepa “almost to the point of suicide before he agreed to take him on as a student.” Thus began Milarepa’s journey to becoming the yogi and poet that he is remembered as today. He began his simple, lonely lifestyle, living in caves. He often wore little clothing, even in the winter months, and became known as “the cotton-clad one.” Though he did not seek students, word of his practice traveled, and he was sought out by many. It is said that Milarepa “engaged with whoever approached him,” and it is through his teaching that his spontaneous songs and poetry were shared.<sup>11</sup> In the practice of Vajrayana Buddhism, it is said that unwavering devotion towards one guru leads to ultimate realization. In famous Tibetan saying ‘*you see flame even in the tooth of dog if you have genuine devotion*’. Milarepa’s unsparing devotion towards Marpa established a great example of the guru-disciple relationship and an unwavering devotion.

Thus, the great translator and teacher were an outstanding scholar and practitioner of Vajrayana Buddhism. He gained the accomplishment of transferring consciousness into another body and was also skilled in demonstrating various miracles. In spite of progressing on all levels of Bodhisattava, he was regarded to have abided on the tenth level of Bodhisattva. Marpa played a role of significant bridge to carry an auspicious teaching of Vajrayana Buddhism to Tibet. The credit of present vastness of Kagyu School and its different lineage undoubtedly goes to him. In present times, The Kagyu School of Tibetan Buddhism have reached all over the world in the form of different lineages. Some lineage may be extinct or merged with other school of Tibetan Buddhism. But, the present lineage like, Karma Kagyu, Drukpa Kagyu, Drikung Kagyu, Barom Kagyu, Taklung Kagyu and others are playing a significant role in propagating Buddhism in general and Vajrayana Buddhism in particular. At last, Marpa Chokyi Lodro achieved Parinirvana at the age of eighty-eight. He is regarded to be an emanation of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra and Dombi Heruka.<sup>12</sup> His lineage was carried on by his four main disciples (four great pillars) name Milarepa, Ngog Choku Dorje, Tshurton Wangi Dorje and Meton Tsonpo. Milarepa was given the tradition of practice or meditation lineage, particularly *Tummo* (Psychic Heat), Ngog Choku Dorje was given the tradition of explanation and particularly the lineage of Hevajra Tantra, Tshurton Wangi Dorje have got the tradition of Guhyasamaja Tantra and Meton Tsonpo holds the tradition of *Odsal* (Clear Light).

These four great pillars of Marpa passed on their teachings one after another. In this way, Marpa Chokyi Lodro is still alive in the heart of his disciples and dispelling the darkness of ignorance through his valuable teachings.

### Notes

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