

TIBET'S GREAT YOGI  
MILAREPA

*A Biography from the Tibetan*



W. Y. EVANS-WENTZ

*with a New Foreword by*  
Donald S. Lopez, Jr.

TIBET'S GREAT *YOGĪ*  
MILAREPA



THE GREAT KARGYÜTPA GURUS

Described on pages xxiii-xxvi

# TIBET'S GREAT YOGĪ MILAREPA

A Biography from the Tibetan  
Being the

*Jetsün-Kabbum*

OR

Biographical History of Jetsün-  
Milarepa, According to the Late  
Lāma Kazi Dawa-Samdup's  
English Rendering

*Edited with Introduction and Annotations by*  
W. Y. Evans-Wentz

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**I DEDICATE THIS BIOGRAPHY OF MILAREPA  
TO THOSE WHO CLING NOT TO BELIEF  
BASED UPON BOOKS AND TRADITION  
BUT WHO SEEK KNOWLEDGE  
BY REALIZATION**

## THE YOGI'S CAR OF VICTORY

'Whoso the Faith and Wisdom hath attained—  
His state of mind, well-harnessed, leads him on ;  
Conscience the pole, and Mind the yoke thereof,  
And Heedfulness the watchful charioteer :  
The furnishings of Righteousness, the Car ;  
Rapture the axle, Energy the wheels ;  
And Calm, yoke-fellow of the Balanced Mind ;  
Desirelessness the drapery thereof.  
Goodwill and Harmlessness his weapons are,  
Together with Detachment of the mind.  
Endurance is the armour of the Norm,  
And to attain the Peace that Car rolls on.  
'Tis built by self, by one's own self becometh—  
This Chariot, incomparable, supreme ;  
Seated therein the Sages leave the world,  
And verily they win the Victory.'

The Buddha, from the *Samyutta Nikāya*, v, p. 6.

(F. L. Woodward's Translation.)

## FOREWORD

*Donald S. Lopez, Jr.*

A certain trepidation attends the decision to accept an invitation to write a foreword to new editions, published in 2000, of the four books of W. Y. Evans-Wentz: *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, *Tibet's Great Yōgī Milarepa*, *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines*, and *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*. The four books in their old editions are already burdened with numerous prefaces, commentaries, and introductions, causing one to wonder what another preface could possibly add. It seems inevitable that the four books of Evans-Wentz will continue to outlive yet another generation of commentators, such that anything that a scholar might add today will only serve as material for a scholar some fifty years from now, who will demonstrate the biases and misunderstandings of a preface written fifty years ago, a preface that merely offers evidence of the *fin de siècle zeitgeist* of those who once called themselves postmoderns.

The four books of Evans-Wentz are surely ground-breaking works, the first to bring translations of Tibetan Buddhist texts to the English-speaking public. Evans-Wentz was equally *avant garde* in his method, collaborating closely with Tibetan scholars, a practice that would not become common for another four decades, after the Tibetan diaspora began in 1959. Yet, for the scholar of the present day, looking back now more than seventy years to the publication of the first volume of the series, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, in 1927, the Tibetan tetralogy of W. Y. Evans-Wentz, although a product of our century, seems to have originated in another age. All four books assume the undifferentiated dichotomy of the materialist West and the mystic East, an East that holds the secret to the West's redemption. Few of the concerns of scholars—such as language or culture or history—are to be found in the books. Instead, the volumes are presented as

repositories of a timeless wisdom preserved by the East, a wisdom that will someday save the West, ultimately overcoming the duality of the hemispheres to culminate in the Unity of Mankind. This apparently beatific vision has since been shown to be the product of a romantic Orientalism that viewed the traditions of Asia as a natural resource to be extracted and refined for the consumption of the West; the books thus mark a moment in the history of colonialism.

Yet the four books of Evans-Wentz, especially the first, represent an important moment in that history. The products of a chance encounter between a Sikkimese school teacher and an American eccentric traveling in British India in 1919, the books have proved to be among the most durable products of the century's romance of Tibet, radiating their influence far beyond what might be expected from such an unlikely beginning.

Walter Wentz was born in Trenton, New Jersey, in 1878, the son of a German immigrant and an American Quaker. The late nineteenth century was a period of great fascination with spiritualism, the belief that spirits of the dead could be contacted through seances, materialization, automatic writing, and other techniques. Walter took an early interest in the books on spiritualism in his father's library, reading as a teen both *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine* by Madame Blavatsky of the Theosophical Society. These works were to have a profound effect on Walter Wentz. Indeed, it is impossible to appreciate his tetralogy without recognizing his lifelong commitment to Theosophy.

The Theosophical Society had been founded in New York in 1875 by Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, a Russian émigré, and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, a journalist and veteran of the Union Army during the Civil War. The goals of their Society were "to diffuse among men a knowledge of the laws inherent in the universe; to promulgate the knowledge of the essential unity of all that is, and to determine that this unity is fundamental in nature; to form an active brotherhood among men; to study ancient and modern religion, science, and philosophy; and to investigate the powers innate in man." The Theosophical Society represented one of several responses to Darwin's theory of evolution during the late nineteenth century. Rather than seeking a refuge from science in religion, Blavatsky and Olcott attempted to found

a scientific religion, one that accepted the new discoveries in geology and archaeology while proclaiming an ancient and esoteric system of spiritual evolution more sophisticated than Darwin's theory.

Madame Blavatsky claimed to have spent seven years in Tibet as an initiate of a secret order of enlightened masters called the Great White Brotherhood. These masters, whom she called Mahatmas ("great souls"), lived in Tibet but were not themselves Tibetan. In fact, the very presence of the Mahatmas in Tibet was unknown to ordinary Tibetans. These masters had once lived throughout the world, but had congregated in Tibet to escape the onslaught of civilization. The Mahatmas had instructed her in Theosophy, which she also referred to as "Esoteric Buddhism," of which the Buddhism being practiced in Asia, including Tibet, was a corruption.

Throughout her career, she (and later, other members of the society) claimed to be in esoteric communication with the Mahatmas, sometimes through dreams and visions, but most commonly through letters that either materialized in a cabinet in Madame Blavatsky's room or that she transcribed through automatic writing. The Mahatmas' literary output was prodigious, conveying instructions on the most mundane matters of the Society's functions, as well as providing the content of the canonical texts of the Society, such as A. P. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism* (1885) and Madame Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* (1888).

The Theosophical Society enjoyed great popularity in America, Europe, and India (despite repeated scandals and a report by the Society of Psychical Research that denounced Madame Blavatsky as a fraud), playing an important but ambiguous role in the Hindu renaissance in India and the Buddhist renaissance in Sri Lanka (where Henry Olcott was particularly active). Its popularity continued after the death of the founders and into the twentieth century, when Blavatsky's heir, the former British suffragette Annie Besant, selected a young Hindu boy in 1909 as the messiah, the World Teacher, Krishnamurti. He renounced his divine status and broke with the Society in 1930. The death of Besant and other leaders followed soon after and the Society never regained the widespread popularity it once enjoyed, although it remains active, with its international headquarters in Pasadena,

California. The Theosophical Society has had a profound effect on the reception of Asian religions, especially Hinduism and Buddhism, in Europe and America during the twentieth century, inspiring, among other works, the Evans-Wentz tetralogy.

Walter Wentz moved to California at the turn of the century, where he joined the American Section of the Theosophical Society in 1901 at its headquarters in Point Loma, headed by Katherine Tingley, who established there the Raja-Yoga School and College, Theosophical University, and the School for the Revival of the Lost Mysteries of Antiquity. At Tingley's urging, Wentz enrolled at Stanford University, where he studied with William James and William Butler Yeats. After graduating, Wentz went to Jesus College at Oxford in 1907, where he studied Celtic folklore. It was there that he added a family name from his mother's side to his surname and became Walter Evans-Wentz. After completing his thesis, later published as *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* (1911), he began a world tour financed by the income he received from rental properties in Florida. He was in Greece when the First World War broke out, and spent most of the war in Egypt.

From Egypt, he traveled to Sri Lanka and then on to India, gaining permission to travel from the British military authorities on the recommendation of a former classmate from Oxford, T. E. Lawrence. Evans-Wentz visited the Theosophical Society headquarters at Adyar and met with Annie Besant. In north India, he studied with various Hindu gurus, especially Swami Satyananda. In 1919 he arrived in the British hill station of Darjeeling on the southern slopes of the Himalayas, where he acquired a worn manuscript of a Tibetan text from a monk (some sources indicate that he acquired it in the bazaar). It was a portion of *The Profound Doctrine of Self-Liberation of the Mind [through Encountering] the Peaceful and Wrathful Deities*, (*Zab chos zhi khro dgongs pa rang grol*) said to have been discovered in the fourteenth century by Karma gling pa (1352–1405). The text is also known as the *Peaceful and Wrathful Deities According to Karmalingpa* or *Kar gling zhi khro* and as the *Bar do thos grol chen mo*, *The Great Liberation in the Intermediate State through Hearing*. Provided with a letter of introduction from the local superintendent of police, Sardar Bahadur Laden La (with whom he would later collaborate on the final volume in his series), Evans-Wentz, who could not read Tibetan, took the

text to the English teacher at the Maharaja's Boy's School in Gangtok, named Kazi Dawa Samdup (1868–1922). Dawa Samdup was already acquainted with western enthusiasts of Buddhism, having served as translator for Alexandra David-Neel. She described him in *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*: “Dawasandup was an occultist and even, in a certain way, a mystic. He sought for secret intercourse with the Dâkinîs and the dreadful gods hoping to gain supernormal powers. Everything that concerned the mysterious world of beings generally invisible strongly attracted him, but the necessity of earning his living made it impossible for him to devote much time to his favourite study.... Drink, a failing frequent among his countrymen, had been the curse of his life.... But, peace to his memory. I do not wish to belittle him. Having acquired real erudition by persevering efforts, he was sympathetic and interesting.”<sup>1</sup>

Kazi Dawa Samdup agreed to provide a translation, and over the course of the next two months he met with Evans-Wentz each morning before his school day began. The translations that Kazi Dawa Samdup made for Evans-Wentz would eventually appear in three books: *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (1927), *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines* (1935), and *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation* (1954). Their time together was brief, however, with Evans-Wentz soon moving back to the ashram of Swami Satyananda to practice yoga. He returned to Gangtok to visit Kazi Dawa Samdup in 1920, shortly before the latter's appointment to the post of Lecturer in Tibetan at the University of Calcutta. This was to be their last meeting; Kazi Dawa Samdup died in 1922. In 1924, Evans-Wentz visited Kazi Dawa Samdup's family in Kalimpong, from whom he received a manuscript translation of the *Rje btsun bka' 'bum* (*The Hundred Thousand Words of the Master*), which Evans-Wentz subsequently edited and published as *Tibet's Great Yogî Milarepa* (1928). Of his relationship with Kazi Dawa Samdup, Evans-Wentz's biographer writes: “The few letters that have survived that they exchanged show a surprisingly distant and formal tone. Even in Dawa Samdup's diaries there is no word to suggest otherwise. There is nothing at all

<sup>1</sup> Alexandra David-Neel, *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), pp. 15, 17, 19.

foreshadowing the later declarations that the Lama was the guru of Walter Evans-Wentz, nothing about the 'teachings' the American was supposed to have received."<sup>2</sup>

There is little testimony as to precisely how their collaboration took place. Kazi Dawa Samdup's English was presumably adequate to the task of producing rough translations. Evans-Wentz describes himself as having served as the lama's "living English dictionary." One can thus assume that much of the terminology derived from Evans-Wentz. And Evans-Wentz provided the lengthy introductions and copious annotations, which together provide the four books with his unmistakable stamp. He did not claim that they were scholarly works; he noted presciently that a critical study of the texts from the perspectives of philology, history, and philosophy was a task for scholars of the future. Instead, he described his works as "anthropological," taking anthropology to mean, "the Knowing, or Knowledge, of Man."

Evans-Wentz made several trips to India in the 1920s and 30s, studying yoga with several prominent neo-Vedantin teachers of the day, including Sri Yukteswar and Ramana Maharshi. He returned to Darjeeling in 1935 and employed two Sikkimese monks to translate another work from the same cycle of texts as the *Bar do thos grol*, entitled *Self-Liberation through Naked Vision Recognizing Awareness* (*Rig pa ngo sprod gcer mthong rang grol*). During the same visit, he received a summary of a famous biography of Padmasambhava, prepared by Sardar Bahadur Laden La, who had introduced him to Kazi Dawa Samdup some sixteen years before. These works would form the last work in the series, *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*, eventually published in 1954.

Evans-Wentz returned to the United States in 1941, and spent the final twenty-three years of his life at the Keystone Hotel in San Diego. He spent his final months at the Self-Realization Fellowship of Swami Yogananda (a disciple of Sri Yukteswar and author of the popular *Autobiography of a Yogi*) in Encinitas, California. Walter Evans-Wentz died in 1965.

<sup>2</sup> Ken Winkler, *Pilgrim of the Clear Light* (Berkeley, Calif.: Dawnfire Books, 1982), p. 44. The other biographical information on Evans-Wentz here is drawn from Winkler's book. A useful summary is provided by John Myrdhin Reynolds in *Self-Liberation Through Seeing with Naked Awareness* (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1989), pp. 71-78.

Evans-Wentz was apparently never a devotee of Tibetan Buddhism, considering himself instead a practitioner of Hindu yoga. His last contact with a Tibetan teacher seems to have been his collaboration with the two monks at the monastery of Ghoom, near Darjeeling, in 1935. Because his collaboration with Kazi Dawa Samdup was so brief, it is difficult to accept his claim that he was “the recognized disciple” of a Tibetan lama. Indeed, Kazi Dawa Samdup seems only to have been regarded as a “lama” by Evans-Wentz himself. Evans-Wentz remained a Theosophist and wrote for various Theosophical publications throughout the rest of his life. He never learned to read Tibetan; perhaps he did not feel it necessary, almost as if he already knew what the texts must say. And if they did not seem to say that, there was always recourse to their esoteric meaning, something he discusses at length in his introduction to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Still, each of his four books holds an important place in the history of Tibetan Buddhism in the West and they must be regarded as pioneering works, not only in the texts chosen but in the mode of their creation; after the Tibetan diaspora that began in 1959, it became common for Western scholars to consult with Tibetan scholars in their translations of Buddhist texts, just as Evans-Wentz had done decades before.

From the perspective of the modern scholar of Tibetan Buddhism, the four books are fraught with problems: errors in translation, inaccurate dates, misattributions of authorship, misstatements of fact, unjustified flights of interpretation. (Referring to himself in the introduction, Evans-Wentz writes on page 79 of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, “The editor himself cannot expect, in a book of this nature, that his own interpretations of controversial problems will meet with universal acceptance; nor can he hope to have escaped all error.”) With many decades of hindsight, each of the books seems somehow premature, translations attempted at a time when the requisite scholarly resources were not yet available. Still, Evans-Wentz makes little attempt to place them in their Tibetan literary and religious context. Indeed, there is very little that is “Tibetan” about the books, despite their titles. One wonders whether the adjective carried above all a Theosophical meaning for Evans-Wentz.

There is a certain audacity about the books; Evans-Wentz

thought that he understood what he read, reading, as he did, through his bifocals of Theosophy and Hindu Yoga. But if Evans-Wentz had not been so audacious, we would not have had the books and their wide influence; even today, few scholars would feel competent to take on the task of translating and annotating all of the works found in *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines*, for example, and even if such a book were to be produced, the scholarly apparatus itself would render it esoteric to all but the initiates of Tibetology.

Evans-Wentz had a different, and much larger, audience of initiates in mind for his esoteric wisdom. The four books of Walter Evans-Wentz are, then, the products of another age, an age when there was little talk of cultural relativism, of radical incommensurability, of historicism, of identity politics, of orientalism, of colonialism, of local histories, or of the late formation of the “world religions.” Instead, in these texts, Evans-Wentz finds endless evidence of an ancient and universal wisdom, whose truth is not mediated by language or history or culture, but which is self-evident to all peoples of all races who will seek it. This may strike some as a rather quaint notion in 2000. Yet the books are about to enter their second century in print.

Despite the greater fame of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, it is the second volume in the tetralogy, *Tibet’s Great Yogī Milarepa*, that is the most successful in the series. It has been widely used in college classes on Buddhism for decades, and excerpts from the book have appeared in numerous anthologies of Buddhist texts, often as the sole Tibetan selection. One reason for its success is that Evans-Wentz exercised more restraint in the editing of this volume than in the others.

Kazi Dawa Samdup had undertaken the translation of the Tibetan text in 1902 and completed it in 1917, two years before he met Evans-Wentz and collaborated with him on *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Dawa Samdup had chosen well the text to translate. *The Life of Milarepa* (*Mi la’i rnam thar*, also known as the *Rje btsun bka’ ’bum*) is one of the most beloved texts in the vast literature of Tibetan Buddhism, with its story and its songs known by many. It is one of two famous works on Milarepa by Gtsang smyon Heruka (1452–1507),<sup>3</sup> the second being the lengthier *One Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa* (*Mi la’i bkur ’bum*) (with “one

hundred thousand" fortunately meaning simply "many"), a work whose narrative begins after Mila has taken leave of Marpa and retired to the mountains. Thus, although it is justly famous for its songs, the longer work lacks the narrative quality of *The Life of Milarepa*. Indeed, no more eloquent testimony to the popularity of the text in Tibet can be made than that of Kazi Dawa Samdup himself, which appears on pp. 27-28.

Evans-Wentz received the completed translation from Dawa Samdup's son in 1924, two years after the lama's death. It is impossible to determine what changes Evans-Wentz made to the translation itself. The work is sometimes criticized for its Biblical language of "ye" and "thy," but this may have been the translator's choice. To his credit, Evans-Wentz compared Dawa Samdup's translation against Jacques Bacot's 1925 French translation, sometimes making changes based on Bacot's clearer reading. Certainly in comparison to the other volumes in the series, Evans-Wentz's introduction and notes are unobtrusive, although generally unhelpful. He employs the anachronistic distinction between sects of Tibetan Buddhism based on the color of hats (Red Hats, Yellow Hats, Black Hats), he misunderstands many points of Buddhist doctrine, and he introduces irrelevant comments regarding Hindu tantra from one Atal Bihari Ghosh of Calcutta. His veiled allusions to Theosophy are limited here to occasional references to the Federation of Truth and Brotherhood of Compassion and Peace, and one effusive proclamation on page 18: "As from mighty broadcasting stations, dynamically charged with thought-forces, the Great Ones broadcast over the Earth that Vital Spirituality which alone makes human evolution possible; as the Sun sustains the physical man, They sustain the psychic man, and make possible mankind's escape from Sangsāric Existence."

One finds in the notes the usual references to the Gospels and to psychic research, but again, these are kept to a minimum. Evans-Wentz generally allows the story to be told in its own terms. The translation itself is reliable for the telling of the tale, although a number of technical terms are misconstrued. Like any rendering done almost a century ago, *The Life of Milarepa* would

<sup>3</sup> On the life of Gtsang smyon Heruka, see the introduction by E. Gene Smith in *Rgod tshan ras pa Sna tshogs ran grol, The Life of the Saint of Gtsan* (New Delhi: Sharada Ram, 1969), pp. 1-37.

benefit from a new translation. One must say, however, that the story told here has stood the test of time.

In his introduction, Evans-Wentz stresses two things about the biography of Milarepa. The first is its universal quality, with Milarepa standing alongside Christian Gnostics, Hindu yogins, and Muslim Sufis as a master of wisdom. In his preface to the second edition, written in 1950, he compares Milarepa to Gandhi. Second, as proof of the text's authority, he repeatedly points out that it is an eyewitness work: the details of Mila's life were narrated by the master himself to Rechung, and Rechung himself was present for the miracles that attended Milarepa's passing.

Two rather different points might also be usefully made. Milarepa has indeed achieved worldwide fame, in large part due to the success of Evans-Wentz's work. But the life of Milarepa is above all a Tibetan work, one that provides numerous insights, at once earthy and ethereal, humorous and inspiring, into the world of Tibetan Buddhism. It should therefore not be universalized to the point that it no longer belongs to its native land. Second, although the life of Milarepa appears to be a first-person account, recorded by his closest disciple, it is in fact a work of high literary achievement, composed some 350 years after the master's death. This is not to say that the story is therefore fictional; other biographies of Milarepa had appeared prior to Gtsang smyon Heruka's composition of his masterpiece in 1484, some as early as the twelfth century. Its literary qualities should not be denied, but celebrated.

After a long introductory paean to Milarepa (pp. 31-40), the story begins with the words, "Thus did I hear," the traditional beginning of a Buddhist sūtra, a discourse by the Buddha. "Thus did I hear" is most often the testimony of the Buddha's cousin and personal attendant, Ānanda, certifying the authenticity of what is to follow as the words of the Buddha. By using these famous words to open his text, the author signals to the reader that they are about to hear the teaching of a buddha, and that the rapporteur of the teaching, in this case, Rechung, speaks with the authority of a witness. A Buddhist sūtra will then identify where the Buddha was staying when the discourse was delivered, and who was in the audience. That same convention is followed here. But then the author departs from the formula briefly to tell a dream.

Rechung dreams that he is in a pure land, where he is invited to attend a discourse by the buddha Akṣobhaya, one of the central tantric buddhas. Akṣobhaya speaks of the miraculous deeds of the great buddhas and bodhisattvas of the past, ending with Tilopa, Nāropa, and then Marpa, Milarepa's own teacher. Rechung had heard the same stories before from Milarepa, but in less detail. Akṣobhaya concludes his discourse by announcing that the next day he will tell a story more wonderful than the ones he had just told, the story of Milarepa. The audience departs in great anticipation of the next day's teaching, and speculates about the present whereabouts of Milarepa, suggesting various buddhlands as his possible abode. Rechung knows that at that moment, Milarepa is in fact living in a cave in southern Tibet.

Rechung's dream introduces a theme that will run throughout the biography: that there are two parallel universes. In one, Milarepa is an impoverished beggar living in a cold cave; in the other, he is an enlightened buddha residing in a pure land; in one Marpa is a cruel and greedy drunk, demanding payment in exchange for his teachings; in the other, he is the compassionate buddha able to purge the sins of murder from his disciple; in one, Milarepa is a dangerous sorcerer to be avoided at all costs; in the other, he is a kind teacher willing to teach all who approach; in one, Milarepa is a murderer, in the other, he is a buddha. Much of the story is concerned with the failure of those in the first world to perceive the second, and Milarepa's eloquent songs are most often intended to shift his listener's perceptions from one to another. In this sense, Mila occupies both worlds, intimating, in the end, that the two domains are coterminous.

Rechung awakens from his dream, realizing that its purpose was to motivate him to ask Milarepa to narrate his own story. Here, the author returns to the conventions of the sūtra, where it is often said that the questions that the Buddha answers in a sūtra are so profound that the questioner is incapable of forming them himself. Instead, the question is magically planted in the questioner's mind by the power of the Buddha. As the *Heart Sūtra* says, "Then, by the power of the Buddha, the venerable Śāriputra said this to the bodhisattva, the mahāsattva the noble Avalokiteśvara, 'How should a son of good lineage practice the profound perfection of wisdom?'" Rechung asks Mila to recount

his life, and like the Buddha, Mila initially demurs. It is only when he is asked again that he consents to “turn the wheel of the dharma,” the traditional term for the Buddha’s teaching.

The narrative then shifts to the first person, as Mila tells his tale. To remind the reader that Mila is addressing his disciples in response to Rechung’s entreaty, each chapter begins in Rechung’s voice, as he asks, for example, “Master, didst thou set off at once to the wild solitudes after receiving the Truths, or didst thou continue to live with thy *Guru*?” (p. 136). Near the end of the story, one of his disciples attempts to praise his teacher by claiming that he is an emanation of a buddha, and asks which buddha Mila might, in fact, be. It is a tenet of Mahāyāna Buddhism that enlightened beings are not limited to the form of the Buddha with which we are familiar; a buddha is able to appear in whatever form, animate or inanimate, that is appropriate to benefit the suffering world. Tibetans believe not only that enlightened beings take rebirth in the world out of their infinite compassion, but that such beings can be identified. (This particular of view of the incarnate lama or *sprul sku* was more fully developed in the fifteenth century than it would have been in the eleventh.) These beings are said to have complete control over their rebirth, choosing the time, the place, and the parents in advance; unlike ordinary beings, they are not blown by the winds of karma to their next rebirth. It is a further tenet of the Mahāyāna that the suffering and privation that the Buddha appeared to undergo in his quest for his enlightenment were all a display; the Buddha had in fact been enlightened aeons ago but pretended to renounce the world, practice asceticism, achieve enlightenment, and die, in order to inspire others to follow the path.

Milarepa’s disciple, aware of the parallel universe of the buddha land, suspects that Milarepa is such a being, already fully enlightened, his years of privation in the caves of snowy Tibet only a performance. What, the disciple asks, is Milarepa’s true identity? Milarepa is not flattered by the question, explaining that there could be no greater insult than to suggest that he is the emanation of a buddha. To do so is to deprecate the excruciating suffering he had to undergo in order for Marpa to expunge from him the sins of his youth. To do so is to minimize the extraordinary efforts he made over many years in solitary caves, subsisting only on nettles,

so that he might achieve enlightenment in one lifetime. To do so is to create an impediment to one's own practice, for to believe that Milarepa was already enlightened from the start is to dismiss the central message of his life: that anyone who murders thirty-five people or less can achieve buddhahood in this very lifetime.

But the *Life of Milarepa* is not simply about buddhahood; it is also concerned with what remains behind. Hence, the final stages of the story are very much concerned with Mila's legacy, again pointing toward the questions of lineage and legitimacy that would have been pertinent in the centuries after his death. Mila is made to recite the names of his disciples, both major and minor, and to enumerate the many caves in which he meditated, caves that in the future would serve both as potent places of pilgrimage and as sacred sites for the practice of meditators.

The events surrounding his cremation point to a range of purposes the yogin is meant to serve in Tibet. The laypeople of southern Tibet are concerned not so much with receiving Milarepa's final instructions but with making sure that he dies in their region; their indecorous infighting over his corpse is motivated by a desire for the blessings that are deposited in the place of a saint's passing. But it soon becomes clear that the more advanced disciples have themselves not transcended such apparently quotidian concerns. They are dismayed at the absence of relics among Mila's ashes, and Rechung himself sings a song imploring Mila to bestow them. The *ḍākinīs* respond with a song suggesting that the disciples consider their own realization as a relic of the master. Despite witnessing the miraculous crystal *stūpa* and receiving its blessings, they still remain in despair at the absence of relics. In the end, Mila relents, sending them to unearth a piece of cloth and a lump of sugar that can be endlessly parceled out to the disciples—the cloth serving as an amulet and the sugar providing a taste of enlightenment—without being exhausted.

It is impossible to comment on all of the remarkable aspects of the story. *The Life of Milarepa* deserves a detailed literary and historical analysis, considering everything from the economics of Buddhist institutions in Tibet to the subtle use of figures of speech in Mila's famous songs. But Evans-Wentz and Kazi Dawa Samdup provide an excellent place to begin.

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## PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

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### THE PATH TO SIMPLICITY AND FREEDOM

‘To have but few desires and satisfaction with simple things is the sign of a superior man.’—*Precepts of the Gurus*.<sup>1</sup>

IT is the same oft-repeated and age-old call from the Supermen, throughout the millenniums, heard by Thoreau and Emerson and Whitman in America, to simple living and high endeavour, which this book transmits, from Tibet, the Land of the Snowy Ranges, to the peoples of the Occident, who have extolled and much preferred, but, of late, not without many disconcerting misgivings, their complex, industrialized way of life.

Whilst *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the first volume of our Oxford Tibetan Series, sets forth the art of knowing how rightly to die and to choose a womb wherefrom to be reborn, this, the second volume of the Series, sets forth the art of mastering life and directing it to the all-transcendent goal of liberation from conditioned existence.

Inasmuch as living and dying and being reborn are held to be inseparable parts of a universal life-process by the followers of the Buddha, and by the devotees of many other Faiths, the first volume of the Series is complementary to the second volume, although a separate and distinct *yogic* treatise in itself.

The first edition of this *Biography* of Milarepa, the illustrious Buddhist saint of Tibet, led to the writing of many letters of appreciation to the Editor, not only by laymen and members of the *Sangha*, of both Northern and Southern Buddhism, but also by Hindus and Christians, Catholic and Protestant alike. And now the Editor hereby thanks each of the writers of the letters for their words of appreciation and encouragement. Each of these correspondents recognized in Milarepa those universal characteristics of saintliness to which no religion

<sup>1</sup> Cf. W. Y. Evans-Wentz, *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines* (Oxford University Press, 1935), p. 80.

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can, rightly, make exclusive claim, but which are common to the saints of all religions. Accordingly, Milarepa may be regarded as being one more light-bearer helping to disperse that darkness of Ignorance of which the Enlightened One spoke as enshrouding the world; and, as has been said of Abraham Lincoln, that he no longer belongs to his native land alone but to all lands, so it may be said of Jetsün Milarepa.

In Milarepa's *Biography* it is shown that the *yogic* path to Supramundaneness is transcendent over intellectually shaped formulas appertaining to salvation, and that it is ever open to all of human kind, irrespective of religious affiliation. In Milarepa's view, none of the world's methods of intellectual development are essential to the attainment of Wisdom; Right Knowledge was, for him, not to be won by study of books, nor by making professions of faith. Many of the most learned and cultured saints of Tibet and India have been illiterate, as will be seen by reference to the forthcoming and fourth volume of the Oxford Tibetan Series, to be entitled *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*. Of these things Milarepa bore witness as follows:—

- 'Accustomed long to meditating on the Whispered Chosen Truths,  
I have forgot all that is said in written and in printed books.
- 'Accustomed long to application of each new experience to mine  
own growth spiritual,  
I have forgot all creeds and dogmas.
- 'Accustomed long to know the meaning of the Wordless,  
I have forgot the way to trace the roots of verbs, and source of  
words and phrases.'<sup>1</sup>

It is by self-disciplining of the mind, after the manner of disciplining a wild horse, and making the mind immune to the obsessing and *yogically* undesirable influences emanating from the illusory phantasmagoria of the world, that Milarepa would have us seek release from our present state of bondage to the world. And hereof he sings, in his song about the Horse of Mind, how the undisciplined mind is to be caught with the Lasso of Singleness of Purpose, tied to the Pole of Meditation, fed

<sup>1</sup> Cf. pages 246-7 of this volume.

with the *Guru's* Teachings, and watered from the Stream of Consciousness. The Horse of Mind is ridden by the Youth of Intellect, along the widespread Plain of Happiness, and carried on to Buddhahood.

As the chemist experiments with the elements of matter, Milarepa experimented with the elements of consciousness; and no other disciple has put to the test of practical application more efficiently than Milarepa did the precepts of his Great Teacher, the Buddha. Because of the successful outcome of Milarepa's practice of Buddhism, Milarepa is venerated not only by Buddhists of all Schools in his native Tibet and in countries of Asia adjacent to Tibet, who consider him to be a Fully Enlightened One, but, more especially since the publication of his *Biography* in the Occident, by an ever-increasing number of truth-seekers throughout all the continents.

Buddhists themselves, even of Milarepa's School, recognize, as we must, that Milarepa's path, being a short-cut to transcendence over the limitations of human existence, will be trodden only by the very exceptional devotee, whose evolutionary growth is adequate to the mighty effort to reach the goal far in advance of slowly evolving humanity as a whole. Though very few may have the spiritual fitness and physical hardihood, and the willingness, to emulate Milarepa, his discovery that the goal is not a mirage, but is attainable, is of paramount importance to the least of mankind; for, in the view of Milarepa's devotees, there will be found in Milarepa's *Biography* the necessary courage to prepare for the first steps upon the path, no matter how long and arduous the path may prove to be, nor how many lifetimes may be required to attain the goal, which Milarepa attained in one lifetime because of his superior preparedness.

However Milarepa, the Saint, be viewed, in this age of technology and utilitarianism, whether with veneration by the few, or with critical indifference by the many, it is anthropologically requisite to recognize, as our eminent Oxford historian, Professor Arnold J. Toynbee, does, that those of our human kind who have done the most to ameliorate the life of man on Earth have not been the scientists, with all their wonderful and laudable discoveries, nor the inventors or technicians, nor the

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leaders of industrialism, nor the captains and the kings and the statesmen, but the prophets and saints:—

‘Now who are the individuals who are the greatest benefactors of the living generation of mankind? I should say: Confucius and Lao-tse; the Buddha; the Prophets of Israel and Judah; Zoroaster; Jesus, and Muhammad; and Socrates.’<sup>1</sup>

These were the rare fruitage of civilizations extending from the Pacific to the Mediterranean. In these very few individuals, the wisdom of all the known civilizations of the past culminates. In them is the crowning and glorious summation of the manifold evolutionary strivings of the innumerable generations of mankind who have lived upon our planet throughout the millenniums of the great cultures of China, of India, of Persia, of Syria and Egypt, of Arabia, and of Europe as represented by Greece. Truly it is that

‘The works of artists and men of letters outlive the deeds of business men, soldiers and statesmen. The poets and philosophers outrange the historians; while the prophets and saints overtop and outlast them all.’<sup>2</sup>

Much more to the Occident than to the Orient (where simplicity, and the self-sufficiency of the village community still largely prevail), the *Biography* of Milarepa will reveal, perhaps rather startlingly, a method of living other than that of attachment to the things that pass away. To Milarepa, as to many other of the Sages of Asia, self-conquest is better than world-conquest, and renunciation of the world better than accumulation of all the riches of the world.

The worldly possessions which Mahātmā Gandhi left behind him are quite comparable in kind and intrinsic value to those left behind by Milarepa. They consisted chiefly of a wooden staff, two pair of sandals, an old-style watch, a small low writing-stand, used while one is sitting on the floor, with an inkpot, a pen and some writing paper thereon, a pair of old-fashioned spectacles, a mat to sit upon in prayer or meditation, a few religious books, including the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, two food-bowls,

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Arnold J. Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1948), p. 156.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 5.

two spoons, and a few pieces of homespun cotton cloth, used to cover his nakedness. Milarepa's chief worldly goods were a bamboo staff, a robe and a mantle, also of homespun cotton cloth, a wooden bowl, a cup made of a human skull from a place of the dead, a flint and steel for producing fire, and a bone spoon.

Though frail physically, as a result of age and self-sacrifice, Gandhi, the Saint, moved, as no armies and armadas of the sea and air could have moved, the mighty and materially supreme world-encircling British Empire. In similar manner, when a delegation of high officials of government waited upon Milarepa to invite him to the presence of a Nepalese king, Milarepa, in refusing the royal summons, challenged the assumed supremacy of the monarch, and boldly asserted that he himself was a mighty king, abounding in riches, and unsurpassed in greatness and power in all the kingdoms of the world.

When Gandhi had audience with the King-Emperor, in Buckingham Palace, it was not in the formal dress, decreed, as Milarepa teaches, by 'ignorant conventionalities', but in the simple homespun loin-cloth garb of white cotton, such as is worn by the Hindu peasant, that Gandhi presented himself before his Sovereign in the resplendent palace. When Gandhi was asked if his scanty attire had proved to be sufficient for the occasion, he replied: 'The King had enough on for both of us.'

To one endowed with *yogic* powers such as those attained by Milarepa, which included the *yogic* power of bodily flight through the air, no need is there of motor-cars or aeroplanes or any other of the mechanical means of human transportation; and, correlatively, no need would there be for an industrialized society which fetters men to toil in coal-mines and iron-foundries and mass-production factories. Gandhi, too, struggled against industrialization, although more or less unsuccessfully, in his own India, and considered industrialization to be an avoidable and unnecessary evil, not because, as Milarepa's life suggests, that by means of *yoga* industrialism can be made obsolete, but because industrialism destroys the arts and crafts normally afflorescent in the simple and comparatively happy

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life of a peasant village community, and, thereby, impedes the manifestation of the Beautiful, which is innate in each one of mankind. For Gandhi, the peasant village communities, which in India, as in China, have been, during thousands of years, the centres of indigenous culture, flourishing independently of mass-production methods, represent the most satisfactory and economically stable form of human society. And this naturally simple and materially efficient form of social organization, being contributory and conducive to the Higher Culture, is more in keeping with Milarepa's teachings than is industrialism.

Milarepa was enabled to sustain life, although not without suffering, to which he was *yogically* indifferent, amidst the arctic-like climate of the high Himalayas, on simple and meagre food, in virtue of indomitable control of his physical body, and, not infrequently, with no other bodily sustenance than that derived, by an osmosis-like process, from air and water and sunshine, similar to the process whereby a plant produces chlorophyll. In his cave there was no central or other heating save that born of the *yogic* practice of *Tummo* within his own fleshly dwelling-house. The many and incessantly increasing products of a technological industrialism, which occidental man believes to be unquestionably necessary, and for which he willingly barter his bodily energy, and, commonly, his health and length of days, and the greater part of his brief time on Earth, would be, for Milarepa, as for the Buddha, merely so many impediments to Right Living. For the purpose of life in a human body is, as Milarepa teaches, not to wallow in the mire of ease and comfortableness, which create attachment to the world, but to evolve beyond worldly existence, however luxurious and comfortable and mundanely happy worldly existence may be made by the discoveries of Western science.

In his own day, Milarepa looked forth from his Himalayan cave with pity and compassion upon the manner of living of men enamoured of the luxuries and comforts which, in full measure, the world can give. And he saw, as in the song about the Five Comforts he teaches, that when desire for comfort, common to man and beast, has been transcended, and Freedom has been won, 'Nought is there uncomfortable; everything is

comfortable'. And he requests that those uninspired by the ascetic life spare him their misplaced pity. Of comfortableness in monasteries, he sang:—

'Accustomed long to regard my fleshly body as my hermitage,  
I have forgot the ease and comfort of retreats in monasteries.'<sup>1</sup>

With still greater pity and compassion would Milarepa behold the manner in which mankind now live amidst the multitudinous contrivances which in Europe and the Americas are considered to be indispensable, even by many monks who teach of the good life. For him, it is not exploitation and physical conquest of the world by science which really matters, but the conquest of the self and the breaking of every fetter that binds men to the treadmill of incarnate existence. To Milarepa, as to all saints of every religion, in all civilizations and epochs of human history, wantlessness and complete renunciation of the worldly way of living rather than all-consuming desire for, and acquisition of, the perishable things of the world, lead to the attainment of a standard of living which is the highest realizable on this planet.

Milarepa perceived early in life, as most men do when too late, that

'All worldly pursuits have but the one unavoidable and inevitable end, which is sorrow: acquisitions end in dispersion; buildings, in destruction; meetings, in separation; births, in death. Knowing this, one should, from the very first, renounce acquisition and heaping-up, and building, and meeting; and, faithful to the commands of an eminent *guru*, set about realizing the Truth [which hath no birth or death]. That alone is the best science.'<sup>2</sup>

And, when approaching his *Nirvāna*, Milarepa further counselled his disciples, thus:—

'Life is short, and the time of death is uncertain; so apply yourselves to meditation, Avoid doing evil, and acquire merit, to the best of your ability, even at the cost of life itself. In short, the whole purport may be stated thus: Act so that ye have no cause to be ashamed of yourselves; and hold fast to this rule. If ye do thus, ye can be sure of never disobeying the commands of the Supreme

<sup>1, 2</sup> Cf. pages 247 and 259 of this volume.

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Buddhas, notwithstanding any conflicting rules which may be found set down in writing.<sup>1</sup>

Milarepa's rules for Right Living are, therefore, in essentials, the same as those enunciated by saints of all epochs, in ancient China, or India, or Babylonia, or Egypt, or Rome, or in our own epoch. It is only those very few individuals in any age or nation who, in virtue of having had the evolutionary fitness, and the willingness, to apply the rules and become in at-oneness with the Brotherhood of Compassion and Peace, have aided in the transmission of the Torch of Wisdom from one generation to another.

So may it come to pass, in accordance with the words which Rechung, the faithful disciple of Milarepa, inscribed in the colophon of the original Tibetan version of Milarepa's *Biography*, that by the mere hearing, or thinking, or touching of Milarepa's *Biography* the devotee shall be spiritually aided, and that

'Through one's study and practice of this *Biography*, the Dynasty of *Gurus* will be fully satisfied.'<sup>2</sup>

The Tibetan *Guru* Phadampa Sangay, who seems to have flourished contemporaneously with Milarepa, and whose testamentary teachings will be published in the forthcoming fourth volume of this Series, *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*, admonished his disciples and the people of the village of Tingri, Tibet, in the following words, which, being personally applicable by each reader of this volume, are here presented as a fitting ending of this Preface:—

'Like the sunshine from a clear space twixt the clouds the *Dharma* is:

Know that now there is such sunshine ; wisely use it, Tingri folk.'

<sup>1, 2</sup> Cf. pages 262 and 309 of this volume.

W. Y. E.-W.

SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA  
*All Saints Day*, 1950

## PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

IN my Introduction and Annotations to the present work, as in those to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, I am attempting to convey to the Western World, and so place on record, certain aspects of Higher or Transcendental Mahāyānic Teachings, which have been handed on to me for that purpose by the Translator, the late Lāma Kazi Dawa-Samdup, my Tibetan *Guru*. For such defects as critics may discover in my transmission—and I cannot hope to have escaped all error—I alone assume full responsibility.

Apart from the greater debt which I as the pupil owe to him who was my preceptor, I acknowledge indebtedness to those Himalayan and Indian *Yogīs* (who prefer that their names be left unmentioned) from whom I had the good fortune, during my wanderings as a research student in India, to gather, at first hand, authoritative information concerning the same ancient ideals of Asceticism and World Renunciation which Milarepa, faithful to his Chief *Guru*, Gautama the Buddha, has so eloquently expounded in this his Biography. These, happily, still find numerous adherents among Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Taoists, Islamic Sufis, and even native Christians throughout Asia.

Among my teachers in the Occident, I am also greatly indebted to Dr. R. R. Marett, Reader in Social Anthropology in the University of Oxford, and Fellow of Exeter College, particularly for the inspiring encouragement with which he has favoured me in my rather unusual field of anthropological research, ever since I first came up to Oxford in the year 1907.

To Major W. L. Campbell, C.I.E., I.A. (retired), late Political Officer representing the British Government in Tibet,

Bhutan, and Sikkim, who assisted the Translator in perfecting the translation of the *Biography*, all readers of this book, as well as the Editor, are much indebted. To Monsieur Jacques Bacot I am under a special obligation for assistance with the transliterations and renderings of Tibetan proper names contained herein, and for the guidance afforded by his interesting and well-illustrated French translation of the *Jetsün-Kahbum*, entitled *Le Poète Tibétain Milarepa* (Paris, 1925). I am also his debtor for information contained in two lengthy letters from him, concerning versions and variants of the text.

To Dr. F. W. Thomas, Boden Professor of Sanskrit in the University of Oxford, I am indebted for some suggestions as to spellings and transliterations of Oriental words; and to Mr. E. T. Sturdy, translator of the *Nārada Sūtra*, who read the final proofs of the *Biography*, I acknowledge a like debt.

To my friend in Oxford, Mr. E. S. Bouchier, M.A. (Oxon.), F.R.Hist.S., author of *Syria as a Roman Province, A Short History of Antioch, &c.*, I am exceedingly grateful for aid which he has rendered in reading through and criticizing my version of the translation both when in manuscript and in proof, and for thus facilitating its publication at a time when I found it necessary to leave England and return to my duties in India.

I am, likewise, indebted to Sj. Atal Bihari Ghosh, of Calcutta, Joint Honorary Secretary with Sir John Woodroffe of the *Āgamānusandhāna Samiti*, for having critically examined the book in the light of Indian thought, especially Brāhmanism and Tantricism, as also to Mr. Sri Nissanka, of Colombo, Ceylon, for similar assistance, chiefly with respect to Southern Buddhism; and for the annotations which each has added.

It is the Editor's ardent hope that this book, too, will serve in its own small way to help the peoples of Europe and

America to realize that the peoples of the Orient are moved by impulses common to all humanity, and hold fast to religious ideals, in essence, the same as their own ; that, anthropologically, the human race is One Family, that external differences due to hereditary racial characteristics, pigmentation, and physical environment are, in fact, purely superficial. Too long has the old barrier-wall, set up in Dark Ages, and built of prejudice and misunderstanding arising from lack of scientific knowledge, been allowed to stand. When, at last, Science shall have demolished it, then will the hour come for the leaders of the races and nations to work not merely for the Federation of the World, but for the Federation of the Truth that exists in all Religions.

I can end this Preface in no more fitting manner than by quoting the Translator's own words :

' That this translation of the life-history of Milarepa might contribute a little to help to make him as well known and esteemed in other lands as he is already in his own was the one wish which impelled me as I worked at my task, and remains my ardent prayer as I lay down my pen.'

W. Y. E.-W.

JESUS COLLEGE, OXFORD,  
*June 21, 1928.*

## MILAREPA

'I am Milarepa, great in fame,  
The direct offspring of Memory and Wisdom;  
Yet an old man am I, forlorn and naked.  
From my lips springeth forth a little song,  
For all Nature, at which I look,  
Serveth me for a book.  
The iron staff, that my hands hold,  
Guideth me over the Ocean of Changing Life.  
Master am I of Mind and Light;  
And, in showing feats and miracles,  
Depend not on earthly deities.'

Milarepa, from the *Gur-Bum*  
(after G. Sandberg's Translation).

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## KARMA

'The Buddhas and the *Arhants* alone have discovered my true nature, in its very essence, and have triumphed over me. All other beings but live under my despotic rule: I put them to death and I make them to live; I am the deity who giveth them the prosperity they enjoy, and I bring about the doing of good deeds and of evil deeds among mankind. Gods, emperors, kings, rich and poor, strong and weak, noble and ignoble, brute creatures, and the happy and the unhappy spirits existing in this world and in the upper and in the lower worlds—all these I elevate or cast down to their respective states. I humble the high and I exalt the low, according to their several works. Therefore am I, indeed, the God who ruleth this [phenomenal] Universe.'

From *Karma's Proclamation of His Omnipotence*.<sup>1</sup>

(Lāma Kazi Dawa-Samdup's Translation.)

'On what we practise now dependeth our future;  
As the shadow followeth the body, *Karma* followeth us.  
Each hath perforce to taste what he himself hath done.'

From *The Golden Rosary of the History of Padma*

[*Sambhava*],<sup>2</sup> Chapter ix.

(Lāma Kazi Dawa-Samdup's Translation.)

<sup>1</sup> The Editor found among the late Lāma Kazi Dawa-Samdup's papers an English translation consisting of three pages bearing this title (but without the Tibetan title of the original text) from which the quotation has been taken. At the end of the translation there is the following note: 'Translated by Dawa-Samdup in accordance with explanations given by the Rev. Prajñā Sathī. 28. 5. 1917.'

<sup>2</sup> Tib. *Padma-Thangyig-Serteng*.