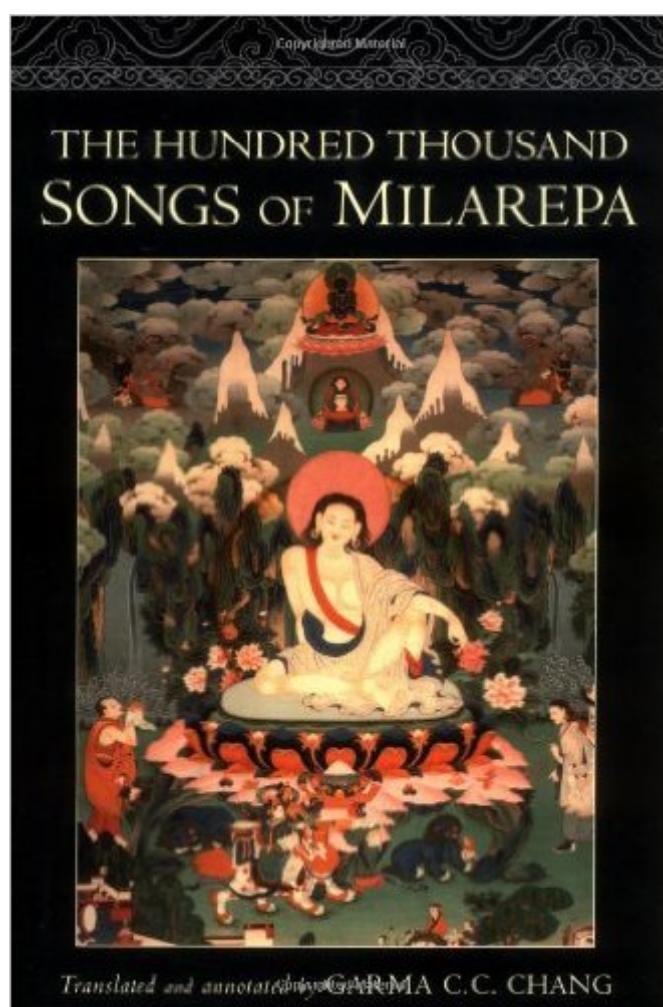


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The Hundred Thousand Songs Of Milarepa: The Life-Story And Teaching Of The Greatest Poet-Saint Ever To Appear In The History Of Buddhism



Synopsis

Tibetans accord The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa a classic status comparable to that of the Mahabharata and the Bible, and revere its author as probably the best single exemplar of the religious life. Milarepa was an eleventh-century Buddhist poet and saint, a cotton-clad yogi who avoided the scholarly institutions of his time and wandered from village to village, teaching enlightenment and the path to Buddhahood through his spontaneously composed songs. Wherever he went, crowds of people gathered to hear his sweet sounding voice "singing the Dharma." The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa, says the book's translator, "has been read as the biography of a saint, a guide book for devotions, a manual of Buddhist yoga, a volume of songs and poems, and even a collection of Tibetan folklore, and fairy tales." With titles like "The Salvation of the Dead," "A Woman's Role in the Dharma," and "Challenge from a Wise Demoness," Milarepa's poems are filled with fascinating tales of miraculous encounters and colorful imagery, and present a valuable insight into the living quality of Tibetan Buddhism. Central as this book is to Tibetan culture, the arcane dialect and obscurity of many original passages daunted translators for centuries; this was the first complete version of the classic to appear in the West.

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Customer Reviews

In May 1992 I discovered Volume Two of this title on a shelf at Border's in Philadelphia. I opened the book and saw these lines: "The woes of life succeed one another Like the sea's incessent waves -- One has barely passed, before The next one takes its place. Until you are liberated, pain

And pleasure come and go at random Like passers-by encountered in the street." (page 635) I felt in love with the text. I read the book from cover to cover and spent three months to track down Volume One and read it. If there is ever a marriage between Passion and Devotion, this book is an example. I wish Garma were still alive.

Garma C.C. Chang, the translator of these songs, single-handedly preserved this book for the West, for it surely would have disappeared, overlooked by religious popularizers. The degree, Cha Gyur Khan-po, 'professor of translation,' was conferred upon the late Professor Chen-Chi Chang by his guru, a living Buddha, Kong Ka Lama, at the Kong Ka Monastery at Meia Nya, Tibet. The monastery is of the Kargyutpa School, which descended directly from Milarepa's line of gurus. C.C. Chang was more than a translator, however. He was among the greatest Buddhist scholars and teachers of the twentieth century. His studies of both exoteric and esoteric Buddhism are powerful because they are unvarnished. Unfortunately, not all his works are still in print. As he brought Milarepa to the West, he also brought what is perhaps China's greatest contribution to Buddhism (and recall, it was China that gave us Zen), the teachings of the 8th century Hwa Yen school, which is contained in C.C. Chang's book, still in print: *The Teaching of Totality*. I was deeply fortunate to have known Professor Chang, and I remember his reverence for Milarepa, his delight at the songs. I remember him imploring his students to delve deep into these teachings, from one of Tibet's greatest masters. Now there is this new edition. By itself, the story of Milarepa is magnificent, a tale of naive cruelty, healing, heroic effort and finally mercy and enlightenment. Milarepa is the psalmist of the Himalayas, and the late Professor's translation is a triumph of the heart. The book is a monument and a refuge.

Garma C.C. Chang created a fluid and readable translation of this classic work, which is useful to any student of religion and folk tales. Central to the translation is the message of transforming human frailty into buddhahood. As a poet and musician, Milarepa chose to guide through song. Milarepa was both radical and loving to all whom he encountered. Mila, too, amply revealed his human frailty during the process of enlightenment. He not only overcame a series of personal tragedies, but also evolved into the consummate example of mastering the poisons of anger and revenge - transforming enemies into friends and bringing many to the dharma. Milarepa is highlighted as an example of how anyone can achieve enlightenment through hard work and perseverance despite his or her past. He shows us that we can all transform our hearts.

Milarepa is considered by Tibetans of all four of the main Buddhist sects (Nyingma, Kagyu, Gelug and Sakya) to be probably the most exemplary Buddhist practitioner in Tibetan history. A great sinner early in his life, he deeply realized impermanence and the constant immanence of death, and the limitless spiritual potential of human life, and practiced so intensely that he achieved complete Enlightenment. This book is a centuries-old collection of his "vajra songs" and spiritual teachings as he wandered through the mountains and villages of 12-century Tibet. To this day, these beautiful songs of realization are among the most popular topics of teachings by Tibetan lamas, particularly of the Kagyu sect.

No point in trying to 'cap' the other reviews, which have given Chang's translation the credit it deserves. Much is the pity, then, that certain 'Tibetophile' snobs have faulted Chang's work - discriminating, it seems, purely because (a) Chang was Chinese, not Tibetan - and (b), working as an academic in an American University. I had the pleasure of corresponding with Chang while at Pen State Uni. 'Garma' Chang was a gifted translator, and no mere dry academic. He had practised with Lama Kung Ka -among others, and had the degree of Cha-gyur Khan-po conferred upon him, which means something like 'Master Interpreter/translator of the Tradition' - a background few academics have had to support their work. Milarepa's enlightenment-poems meant something real and vital to the translator, who put his heart into the task of turning them into pellucid, expressive English. By the same token, Chang's study of the Hua-Yen (cf. The Buddhist Teaching of Totality) was permeated with the lively insight of one who had transmuted the living meaning of Buddhism from the ore of tradition. Chang Hsien-sheng came from a generation of Chinese Buddhists who knew the Dharma well, his Buddhist background and excellent command of English idioms making him an ideal translator. Chang's version of 'The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa' was much more than a 'translation' - it was a labour of love, conveying well the whole spirit of Milarepa's life and work. This book conveys kalyanamitrata in the truest sense of the term. Highly recommended.

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