

# *Skillful, Enjoyable, Wonderful*

## Singing as Buddhist Practice

### An Overview by Ari Goldfield

Those who are familiar with Khenpo Rinpoche and his teaching style know of his special emphasis on Buddhist songs. In such songs Dharma practitioners can express any aspect of the path, and the songs of the great masters are Rinpoche's focus in that he studies them, memorizes them, explains them to his students, sings them, and has his students sing them too. He has also composed many profound songs himself. In all these ways, Rinpoche has demonstrated to his students what a wonderful Dharma practice singing can be.

The tradition of Buddhist singing goes all the way back to the Buddha Shakyamuni himself. The Buddha's teachings are divided into twelve sections, and one of these is the "Set of Teachings Given in Melody." These were the teachings that the Buddha actually sang to his students.

Then, at the start of the Kagyu lineage that Rinpoche holds, the great masters Tilopa, his student Naropa, and Naropa's student Marpa each sang many songs of realization. And the one who sang the most songs of all was Marpa's student, the Lord of Yogis, Milarepa. Perhaps it is no coincidence that of all the countless Tibetan masters who achieved high levels of realization, the one who sang the most songs, Milarepa, is also the only one who is universally acknowledged by Tibetan Buddhists of all lineages to have attained perfect enlightenment.

Milarepa sang about all aspects of the path of Dharma and how he integrated Dharma practice into his own life. He even sang this verse about singing itself:

Singing the key instructions  
Isn't meaningless,  
It's the lineage tradition.

### Why Sing?

The great masters of the past and present emphasize singing because it is such a skillful method of Dharma practice. The first benefit of singing Dharma teachings is that it is much easier to learn a song by heart than it is to memorize prose. Singing Dharma songs therefore allows us to easily remember the Dharma's essential instructions. That is beneficial because when our minds are agitated by suffering, and especially at the point of death—which could come suddenly and without warning—we want to be able to



remember the key points of practice as readily as possible, without having to look them up in a book or else be unclear what to do.

Singing also improves our meditation because it is an excellent remedy for meditation's two main obstacles: dullness and agitation. Mental dullness and foginess evaporate quickly when we sing in a strong and clear voice. And singing prevents mind from becoming agitated or distracted by outer objects, because mind has the song to hold on to as a stabilizing focus of attention. With dullness and agitation cleared away, we can concentrate well on the meaning of the song we are singing, and our understanding and meditation improve.

Furthermore, singing has a positive effect on the subtle channels and energies in our bodies. At the crown of the head, throat, heart, and navel, many subtle channels come together in what the Vajrayana teachings call "chakras." If the channels in these chakras (particularly the heart chakra) become constricted and energy gets stuck there, we can feel anxious and uncomfortable. Singing in a strong and clear voice opens up the channels, which allows the subtle energies in the body to flow easily, bringing us relaxation and clarity. A person can definitely experience this happening whether or not they have studied the Vajrayana teachings on the subtle body.

Finally, singing is enjoyable. If we like a particular type of Dharma practice we will do it more often, which only brings benefit to ourselves and others. Not everyone enjoys singing right away—some students are initially put off by the singing they encounter at one of Khenpo Rinpoche's teachings. But in so many cases people find that over time they perceive its benefits and enjoy it more and more, until they become some of the most enthusiastic singers of all.

## Singing in Different Languages and Melodies

Khenpo Rinpoche instructs his students to sing translations of Indian and Tibetan Dharma songs in the students' native languages and melodies. Sometimes people ask: "Why are you singing in English and other languages instead of Sanskrit or Tibetan? Should you not sing in those blessed traditional languages of the Dharma?" In fact, to sing in one's own language is the Buddhist tradition. It is taught that one of the miraculous features of the Buddha's speech was that his teachings were understood by all listeners, each in their own individual language. Therefore, the Buddha did not truly speak any one particular language. There is no one language that is inherently more blessed than any other. Certainly, Sanskrit and Tibetan are blessed by the realized masters who practiced in those languages, but just as Tibetans did with their own language when they began practicing Buddhism so many centuries ago, so can modern Dharma practitioners bless their own languages by using them for Dharma practice.

People also inquire about the songs' original melodies, and about the appropriateness of using new ones. Rinpoche states that there is no way to know what the original melodies were. Rinpoche himself has made up melodies, and he also sings melodies his teachers created. He teaches that what is important is to sing the songs, which one will do more often if one enjoys the melodies. That is why it is good to sing in melodies that are harmonious with our own cultures.

In fact, singing in culturally familiar melodies is also a tradition that dates back to the time of the Buddha. When the Buddha's monks first started to chant his verses, it is said that the local Indian people thought it sounded awful. No one liked to listen to the monks sing. So the Buddha instructed the monks to sing in melodies that people would like. The monks used the melodies of the Indian Hindu Brahmins, and the people were pleased.\*

## Milarepa's Inspirational Life and His Songs

Over the decades, Khenpo Rinpoche has given so many wonderful teachings on the songs of realization sung by a great variety of realized teachers. And the master whose songs Rinpoche has sung and taught the most is Milarepa.

Milarepa is renowned and revered not only for his attainment of enlightenment, but equally for the way in which he did so. As a child he endured tremendous suffering; as a youth he committed unspeakable deeds of killing and destruction; and as a man he unshakably dedicated himself, in the face of all hardships, to cultivating wisdom and compassion. Whether it was a lack of adequate food or clothing, harsh weather, or harassment by robbers and family enemies—whatever difficulties Milarepa faced, he found sanctuary in the armor of patience, the strength of altruism, and the citadel of the true nature of mind. By doing so he transformed obstacles into epiphanies; enemies into friends and students; suffering into joy; and he became an inspiration over the past nine centuries to countless people who have encountered his story. In times of difficulty Tibetans regularly turn for solace to a book containing Milarepa's biography and songs; some who go to practice retreat in mountain caves carry with them only that book. Even some Chinese Communists came to admire Milarepa—there are accounts of Chinese officials in certain areas telling Tibetans that practicing Dharma by staying in monasteries and accepting offerings from the people was a drain on society's resources and therefore forbidden; however, anyone who wanted to practice Dharma like Milarepa and stay by themselves in a cave would be allowed to do so.

Of all of Milarepa's songs that Rinpoche has taught us (and which we aspire to publish along with Rinpoche's explanations in future volumes),

*The Seven Ways Things Shine Inside and Out* is the first one presented here, because in it Milarepa gives us an overview of all the stages of his life and how he applied Dharma practice in each one of them. Then in *The Eighteen Kinds of Yogic Joy*, presented next, Milarepa sings to us of how, as a result of his realization of the true nature of reality, he is able to enjoy all the episodes in his very recognizably human life, complete with its great variety of experiences and emotions, in an equally delightful, spacious, and courageous fashion.

Both of these songs are filled with insights for us, and by reading, contemplating, and singing them, we connect with Milarepa's own experience and realization in a way that edifies and elevates our own.

## How to Practice "Singing Meditation"

Khenpo Rinpoche has explained that there are different ways you can meditate while singing. First, you can let your mind rest one-pointedly on the sound of the melody while you sing.\* Doing just that is a way to practice *shamatha* (calm-abiding) meditation. And if, while doing that, you let your mind rest right within the sound's true nature, sound-emptiness, that is *vipashyana* (superior insight) meditation. If you let your mind rest in the recognition that the nature of the sound and your mind perceiving it are undifferentiable, that is the Mahamudra meditation called "meditating with appearances."

You can also focus on the meaning of the words, and in that way practice what is called the "meditation with the focus of the learned ones," because you are learning something at the same time you are meditating. You are learning the profound words of the Dharma and reflecting on their meaning, and so while you meditate your wisdom is increasing.

Finally, you can do the Mahamudra practice called "meditating with the moving mind" by looking directly at the nature of the thoughts that arise while you sing, and relaxing in their essential nature—clarity-emptiness, luminosity, great bliss.