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PRODUCTION NOTES

The Making of *Milarepa* and the Madness of *Mo*

By Isaiah Seret (1st Assistant Director and Associate Producer for *Milarepa*)

Milarepa, Tibet's greatest meditation master, lived as a yogi at the end of the eleventh century in Western Tibet. Born into an affluent family, Milarepa watched as their estate was stolen by an ambitious uncle after his father passed away. To avenge this injustice, Milarepa mastered the arts of black magic and assassinated his uncle's family and friends. Almost immediately Milarepa felt great remorse for his brutality and set out to undo his bad karma. Guided by a spiritual teacher named Marpa, Milarepa endured many physical hardships and mental challenges designed to purify his negative actions. Ultimately, after a series of strict cave retreats, Milarepa attained spiritual enlightenment. Soon after, a number of disciples flocked to him requesting his teachings. Milarepa became a great teacher, a master at sharing his wisdom and insights, renowned for his unusual methods and ascetic lifestyle.

One day Milarepa's closest disciple, Rechungpa, requested, "Milarepa, for the benefit of myself and all of your students and for those people fortunate enough to hear about you in the future, please tell us the story of your life."

Milarepa replied, "Rechungpa, you know my story better than I, but since you request, I can say this much: My people are called Kyudpo. When I was young I was called Thöpa, now I am Milarepa. In my youth my actions were deadly, in the middle I practiced purity, now I have passed beyond both. My karma has been destroyed and in the future it will not affect me. To say more than this may make some people cry, it may make some laugh, but what's the point of that? I'm an old man, leave me in peace."¹

Yet Rechungpa pleaded continuously until Milarepa told his life story. This life story was recorded by Rechungpa and has become a Himalayan "bestseller," an inspirational text for meditators and the most prized biography of the Tibetan people.

Milarepa's master, Marpa, prophesied that his disciple would become famous. Milarepa once brought Marpa a large empty cauldron as a gift. When Marpa received it, he said "because it is empty, you will live your life in poverty." Marpa struck the cauldron, which made a thunderous sound. Marpa then said, "However, because it has made such a beautiful sound, your name will be known far and wide and you will become the most famous of all Tibetan yogis." We see today that Marpa's prophecy has come true. Nearly a thousand years later, the legend of the great saint Milarepa has spread far beyond the Himalayas and continues to inspire and entertain those fortunate enough to hear his name.

Milarepa's legend has echoed outward from that thunderous cauldron to books, folk songs, and stage plays, and now to the silver screen. In 2004, Neten Chokling, a Tibetan lama in the lineage of Milarepa, set out to bring the life of Milarepa to audiences around the world with his 90-minute feature film *Milarepa: The Journey Begins*.

Having suffered a number of setbacks and obstacles in the process of making the film, including financial, technological, and metaphysical, somehow Neten Chokling has managed to complete the film.

This article details the immense struggle of Neten Chokling to make this film, along with my own peculiar and fated participation in the project as Associate Producer and First Assistant Director.



The idea of making a film about Milarepa has been around for decades. A number of efforts to create a film about his life have been funded and set in motion; however, they have all met with insurmountable obstacles which, according to Tibetan tradition and folklore, were due to two categories of supernatural beings who have a say in matters of this sort. First are the protective *dakinis*, feminine deities who are devoted to Milarepa and apparently have very high standards and expectations when it comes to independent filmmaking. I imagine they are like a gang of art-house moviegoers who are virtually impossible to appease.

Next are the *döns*, supernatural harmful spirits who try to impede all actions that could bring goodness into the world, such as making a movie about a sinner turned saint. The *döns* were evidently very effective. At least a dozen scripts, a number of treatments, and one half-finished film about the life of Milarepa are floating around, none of which have seen the light of day. The unfinished film was put together by the great Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, funded by Allen Ginsberg's poetry readings, and produced by a group of his students. The seventh volume of Chogyam Trungpa's collected works contains the following information regarding his film:

"Tragically, because of the problem with the lens" [when the filmmakers returned to the United States and developed the film, they found that] "the lens caused the film to go a little out of focus, some of the time," [but not all the time. However,] "for eventual big-screen 16mm projection, this could not be fixed." The project was put on permanent hold. "At Naropa, during the first summer session where I was teaching Film Expression, I made inquiries about the Milarepa film and got different answers," says Baird Bryant. "[when] I asked Rinpoche. He said, 'I'm sorry to say, the Milarepa film is in the Bardo.'"² So, there it was, lost in a Buddhist purgatory.

Fortunately, Neten Chokling's film was not lost or subject to faulty lenses. Chokling had been an assistant to fellow lama and film director Khyentse Norbu on his two critically acclaimed films, *The Cup* and *Travellers & Magicians*, and through this experience he was able to mount a professional production with investors and producers who were able to ensure a high-quality final product. This is not to say that the production was ultra-professional; in fact, that was far from the case.

About the Production

My first memory of Neten Chokling expressing interest in making a film about Milarepa was while sitting around a campfire, eating marshmallows on a freezing night in central Bhutan. We were there in the winter of 2002 for the production of *Travellers & Magicians*. Chokling was 28 at the time, and was serving as acting coach, second unit director, and occasional stuntman. I was there as the first assistant director. The conversation was casual enough, dreamy campfire talk, but when he introduced the idea of a Milarepa film, I immediately thought it would be a wonderful yet very ambitious production.

A few months later in Colorado, I found myself on a chairlift with Chokling and he said, "I'm going to do it, I'm going to make Milarepa." I told him it was a wonderful idea. We parted ways, and it was three months before I heard from him again. It was a hot mid-summer day and I was on a cell phone walking and sweating my way up a hill when Neten Chokling called on the other line to say he would be filming Milarepa in September. He wanted to know if I would come along. "You mean September 2004," I said. "No, September 2003," he replied with his characteristic chuckle. I thought to myself, *wait a second here*. He hadn't even started the script when we last spoke three months ago and now he is going to start production in two months. "How is that possible?!" I asked. Chokling told me that he had wanted to wait six more months, but the *Mo* said that if he didn't shoot in September the movie would never get made.

What, or who is *Mo*?

According to Tibetan scholar Jamgon Mipham, *Mo* is a “predictive technique that has been heavily relied upon throughout the centuries. . . . It has been the general practice of Tibetans to consult some method of prognostication (*Mo*) when questions arise concerning various occurrences in their lives—bad dreams, the arising of an illness, the undertaking of some work or travel, or even the wish to engage in spiritual disciplines or practices.”³ Essentially, *Mo* is an ancient divination system, used by the Tibetan people in a ritual context, to decide matters of utmost importance.

Because this was a case of such utmost importance, the *Mo* was asked everything—what film stock to use, where to rent the cameras, who should be the cinematographer, who should play the leading role, and so on. In one regard, the *Mo* is a great tool, because first-time filmmakers have a lot of questions and get a lot of different advice, but when it comes to picking a start date to shoot a \$1.5 million dollar film, and the date the *Mo* picks is six months before the film could be possibly ready, I think it was really asking for trouble. As Neten Chokling said in a Tibetan newspaper, “The date for starting the filming was set for next March, but the *Mo* suggested that the filming should start this year, in September. Everyone thought I was crazy. . . . there was no preparation time, no script, no money. But that’s what the *Mo* said.”⁴

I must confess that I didn’t know if I should get involved with this project; it sounded like a setup for insanity. After much contemplation, I decided to fight fire with fire. I would have a *Mo* done to see if it was a good idea for me to work on the film. I asked the director of *Travellers & Magicians*, Khyentse Norbu, who is also a great meditation master, if he would do the divination for me. He obliged, took up a rosary, blew on it a few times, entered into a meditative state, counted the beads several times, and then looked at me and nodded his head to say, “Yes, go.” I could have predicted that myself.

So with no real preparation time, no script, and no money, we were going to make a movie. In all fairness, it was July and Chokling did have a rough draft of his script. He had Raymond Steiner, the producer of *Travellers & Magicians*, on board and he had some ideas about how he could raise the money. When I arrived in India in September of 2003, Chokling had a nearly completed script and enough money to bring a crew into Northern India to start the filming. He did not, however, have enough money to finish the principal photography, but this did not seem to worry him. The movie was on.

It was a mad dash to get everything together; we were making a period film, which required tons of costumes and antiques. Fortunately, we had a monastery with over 100 monks willing to do anything their teacher (Neten Chokling’s “day job”) needed. The monks were tireless when set to task, and managed to get things done, albeit in the most unconventional ways ever imaginable.

With everything moving along, the only crisis we faced before starting to film was over the casting of Milarepa’s mother. We were two days from starting the shoot and we still didn’t have an actress. Orgyen Tobgyal Rinpoche (aka O.T. Rinpoche), who played Gecko, the disciplinarian in *The Cup*, was on the case, making a last-minute drive to Dharamsala to search the streets for actresses. All our hopes were riding on this; however at the end of the day, he came back with the news that he hadn’t found anyone. He said the only person who seemed to work was a Tibetan lady in a window of a top-floor apartment, but he was not yet able to find out her name. We tracked down the building owner and eventually got the lady’s name. She was a singer named Kelsang Chukie Tethong, trained at the Tibetan Institute for Performing Arts. She also happened to be on her way to Taiwan for a concert tour. We asked her to consider the part and requested her to wait to go on her tour for one day, which she did. She sent us some photos (it was the day before we started filming). They were very dark and difficult to make out, so we called and told her *no thank you*. We continued our search, but to no avail. Eventually we had the idea to do a *Mo* to see if we would find anyone better than the lady in the window. The answer was no. Raymond quickly called her back—she was now in Delhi, about to fly out—and begged her to star in the film. It took additional calls from several high Tibetan Lamas and government officials before she agreed to cancel her tour. And in fact, the *Mo* was dead on; she is a great actress.

The production started on the September 8, 2003. It was set off with an enormous *puja* (Tibetan offering and meditation ritual), filled with many juniper bonfires billowing dense white smoke, instruments invoking the deities, chanting, offering cakes, bottles of whisky poured onto the

flames, and lots of maroon-robed monks. The ritual was immensely powerful, and gave the handful of foreign crew a sense that these monks are real pros at something. Even if it is not film-making, they are experts at harmonizing the metaphysical plane, and maybe that's ultimately all we needed to make this film.

With the pujas complete and the crew in order, we set off for the valley of Spiti, in the northwest Himalayas at an elevation of 12,000 feet. If the puja kick-off brought us a little piece of heaven, the two-day dust filled drive was definitely our taste of underworld. Riding in a Jeep bumping along at 10 miles per hour for 12 hours a day was like sitting in a paint mixer at the hardware store. The change in altitude was making our crew a little crazy, and the intensity of the dry barren landscape was unnerving, especially for our Indian lighting crew from Delhi; two of them had to turn back because of altitude sickness, and the rest asked to leave as soon as we arrived in Spiti. Somehow the majority of us got there in one delirious piece, although instead of taking the customary two days to acclimatize, we had to convince the Indian crew to stay, and then jump right into production.

The first thing I noticed about Spiti Valley was that there was only one working telephone in the entire valley, and this phone was surrounded by Indian truck drivers who were willing to wait hours on end to place their calls home. This was not a comforting thing for a film crew. Nor was the fact that our hotel rooms had no heat and it was expected to fall below freezing every night. Yet these concerns paled next to the information that when it snowed, the only road out could close for the entire winter season. If we were still there when the road closed, our crew might be able to get helicopter lifts out, but our vehicles would have to stay until spring. This was not an option, especially for the three expensive lighting, grip, and generator trucks that we had rented in Delhi. We inquired when the road usually closes and we were told around November 1. I checked our schedule again; we were due to shoot until November 7.

At this point, I would like to make a note about Neten Chokling, both as a person and as a director. Neten Chokling, a 30 year-old Bhutanese Lama and Rinpoche, is famous for having never been angry or stressed in his life. In fact, he is pretty much always happy. After seeing him in many difficult situations, I can attest to this fact. This is not to say he is lackadaisical - he is not. He sleeps about 4 hours a night, and is very active in making the most out of every moment in his life. This relaxed attitude may seem like a good thing, and it is, especially in hard times when morale can get low. But somehow the fact that he doesn't stress is very disturbing and upsetting for the people around him, especially for myself as the assistant director in charge of the schedule, and also, I hear, for the people who help manage his monastery, who want him to discipline rowdy monks. But this sort of behavior is not in his vocabulary. As a director, he is not completely passive, although he usually waits for everyone else to give his or her input before speaking up (which definitely slowed us down). He has a clear vision of how he wants things, but he likes to collaborate and build off of the feedback of his key creative people, the cinematographer, producer, and actors.

Now, back to the drama, in which Neten Chokling was perpetually not caught up. Our shoot started off solid. We were making our schedules, the crew was working hard to get things done, the attitude on set was fresh and unjaded compared to that of film professionals in other countries, and all in all, it seemed like this crazy project was coming together. That is, until the wind started and the dust began to take its toll.

It is extremely dry in Spiti, like a desert, no trees, just wind and dust and mountains. After our first week of shooting, one of our cameras jammed up and became unusable. One day later, the same thing happened to our back-up camera. We realized that the breakdown was caused by the fine dust particles that had lodged in every nook and cranny of the cameras. We had to stop filming while the camera crew cleaned the equipment and to wait for parts or advice to come from Australia. We were now almost five days behind schedule, a schedule that would already leave us stuck in the snow even if we finished it on time.

A number of *Mos* were done regarding the camera crisis. They indicated that there were certain spirits that were not pleased with our production. In response, O.T. Rinpoche assembled a team of monks to do pujas around the clock to avert and pacify the negative forces we were up against.

During these gaps in filming, Chokling and Raymond had to work on fundraising, a task for which the one phone line in Spiti was a bit inadequate; Raymond had to leave for Manali in the hope of making headway with potential investors. Unfortunately, he came back empty handed.

As the pujas went on, we eventually got our cameras up and running again, via blessings and a rubber hammer. Back on task, we didn't encounter any significant difficulties until we had to shoot the dreaded "boulder" scene. In this scene Milarepa uses his black magic to send a gigantic boulder down a mountain onto villagers who are chasing him. Considering the film's low budget, several special effects labs in Sydney suggested it would be best to send a real boulder down a mountain instead of making a cheap paper-mache facsimile or creating it in post-production. O.T. Rinpoche and his crew of monks in the art department picked out a boulder that seemed like it was ready to tip over at any moment. It was about the size of a small school bus and sat about 30 meters above a ravine.

So there we were, with our cameras rolling our precious film away, all our crew hiding for their lives and a group of monks armed with bamboo poles attempting to send the boulder flying down the mountain. It didn't happen. The boulder was not as ready to tip over as we had thought, and we ended the day feeling defeated.

Again the militia of monks was called in to do round-the-clock pujas, mos were done, and one week later, armed with three car jacks, we were back at the rock face. This time, O.T. Rinpoche preformed a special puja at the site of the filming, and the boulder was then lifted. It came crashing down, in near slow motion, a massive release and shift in the earth and a triumph for the crew. We later found out that the local villagers believed that demons, which were terrorizing their village, were forced out by a combination of this act and the blessed presence of Chokling and O.T. Rinpoche in their village.

Now, with the bulk of the shooting over, we still had to reconcile the fact that we were 7 days behind schedule, and 14 days past the recommended road-closed-get-out day. It was late October, and on one particularly cold morning it started to snow. This sent a shiver of concern through the crew. Rumors that the road had been temporarily closed had already reached us. That day at lunch, a final *Mo* was done. We asked for the last possible day that we could safely stay there. It was November 3.

Chokling and I looked at the schedule. We decided that there were a few things we could film back at his monastery, but that we would have to shoot until November 3 to get all the essential scenes. This meant that we could not leave until November 4 or 5, depending on how fast we could pack up. On November 3, as we finished shooting, our crew packed their gear at lightning speed. It was starting to snow, yet somehow the snow wasn't sticking. We left the morning of the 4th, making the very long drive to Manali in one day. On the Morning of November 5, it was announced: the road was now closed until the spring.

Back at Chokling monastery we completed the principle photography. Chokling took out a number of loans to pay back all necessary expenses, and had to apologetically ask people to defer many more of the expenses. It would be one full year until Chokling had the money to complete the editing of his film. At this point we realized that the original *Mo* was correct. If we had waited, the movie would never have been made. It would never have been funded. None of it would have happened. Now, nearly two years later, Chokling has completed his movie on the life of Milarepa, part one. The film, and Milarepa's legacy, will see the light of day.

NOTES

1. *mi la ras pa'i rnam thar mdor bsdus*, published by Dehradun: Ngawang Gyaltzen and Ngawang Lungtok, 1970. Reproduced from the manuscript collections of gra sku-zhabs bstan-'dzin-nor-bu. Verses Translated by Neten Chokling Rinpoche and Isaiah Seret.
2. *The Collected Works of Chogyam Trungpa, Volume 7: The Art of Calligraphy (excerpts); Dharma Art; Visual Dharma (excerpts); Selected Poems; Selected Writings* by Chogyam Trungpa, Carolyn Gimian, editor. Shambhala, 2004
3. *MO: Tibetan Divination System* by Jamgon Mipham. Translated and edited by Jay Goldberg. Snow Lion Publications, 2000.
4. *Much more than yak, yak, yak*, issue 5, by Haaretz. World Tibet Network News. Published by the Canada Tibet Committee Wednesday, October 29, 2003 http://www.tibet.ca/en/wtnarchive/2003/10/29_5.html