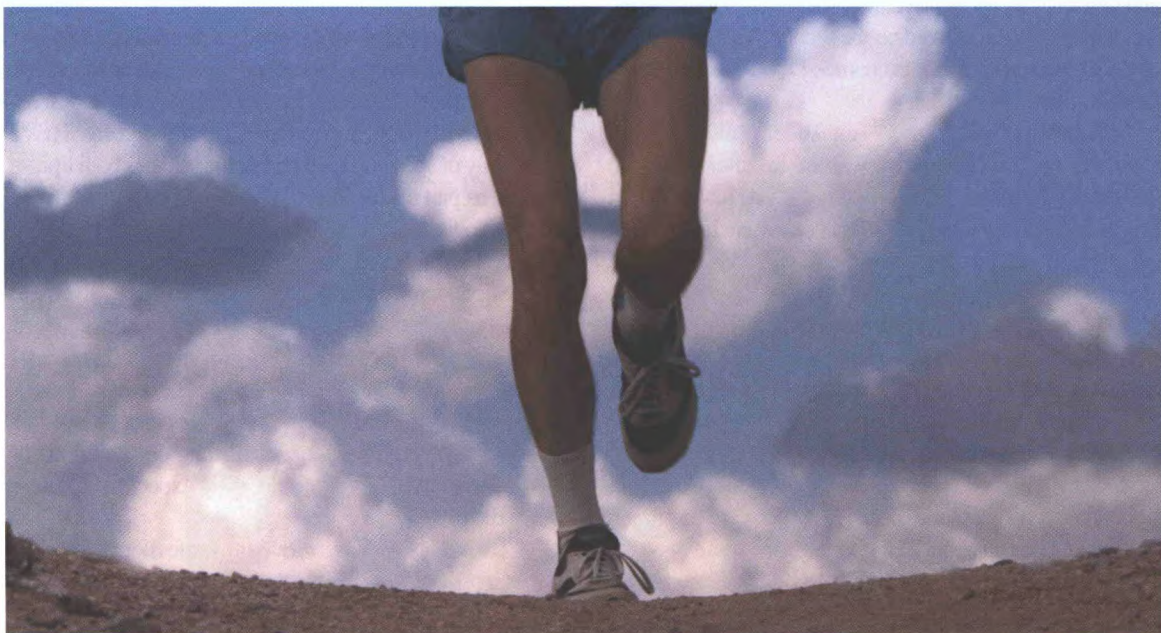


BY VEN TENZIN CHONYI

### Training for Buddhahood

*The lam rim teachings offer a step-by-step guide to the path to enlightenment*



If you want to become an Olympic athlete, you train your body. You find out how your body works, how it can be trained, and what to expect as you keep up your training schedule. And you would need to know what *not* to do. What if you want to train your mind? How do you join the ranks of the great spiritual teachers, yogis and saints? Is it really possible for an ordinary person to become fully enlightened? All these questions, and more, are answered in the *lam rim* teachings.

Literally, *lam rim* means a graduated path to enlightenment – it is a training manual, helping us achieve the utmost in human potential, no less than becoming a buddha. Like any other training manual, it has exercises for beginners and advanced practitioners, for people starting from different levels and with different motivations. There are brief outlines and lengthy details. And just as an athlete begins to experience benefits from the training long before running for Olympic gold, so do we also experience benefits from this spiritual training, long before achieving the “gold” of Buddhahood. *Lam rim* is a training manual for Dharma practice, and its goal is enlightenment.

The *lam rim* shows us how to move from being within the realities of our individual suffering to going completely beyond it. We do this not by suppressing our feelings and turning away from life, but by learning how to embrace our very humanity. And through embracing our

own humanity and its poignant mix of suffering and joy, we also come to feel both profound grief that others suffer even more deeply, and great joy when we see their suffering released, and their own humanity blossom. It is this poignant mix of grief and joy, of compassion and loving kindness, which gives meaning to our lives.

The *lam rim* teaches us how to find what we intuitively know is possible – a life which is meaningful and satisfying. As such, it is a profound psychology and philosophy for living and dying. Have you ever wondered why some children are geniuses, or angry from birth, or incredibly kind? The *lam rim* explains it all – how we create imprints on the mind, and how this has been happening for countless lifetimes. A genius is the result of conditioning the mind that way in previous lifetimes. And if we can condition our mind, then we can also de-condition it – and change it for the better.

The fact that we can deconstruct all the harmful contents of the mind and reconstruct it until our minds are completely pure, gives us hope. This is how we reach enlightenment. This is the Buddhist path. When we have achieved this, we will be omniscient; we will be buddhas. Of course, the doing of it is not quite so simple. If we want to achieve enlightenment, we need to complete the whole path of the *lam rim* – a daunting task. But one of the beauties of this manual is that we can start from where we are;

we can observe how our minds work in our ordinary, everyday lives.

Maybe I'm irritated by the slow check-out line. Instead of blaming the checkout girl, I could reflect on what I'm in such a hurry about. Does it really matter if I'm late? When I think that people are dying of hunger, does it matter that I had to wait in the line? What imprints am I putting into my mind when I am irritated? What imprints am I putting in my mind when I am relaxed?

If I meditate on these things, then I begin to understand what I need to do to change my life, but it is the actual doing which is most important. These are the little, but important, beginnings. As our wisdom and meditation increases, then we can get into the harder training sessions.

*Lam rim* refers to the benefits of lasting satisfaction – and then tells us how to go about getting this, after reminding us that we had better do this before we die and lose this precious opportunity.

So how do we achieve this lasting satisfaction? First we need to understand what Dharma is about. This means that we need to take refuge in wisdom, the wisdom-compassion mind of a Buddha – rather than in sex or dependency, or drugs, food, or any other form of addiction. In doing this, we open our hearts and minds to this inner wisdom and compassion, allowing our minds to be suffused by this healing energy.

With open hearts and minds, we can more readily accept the Dharma teachings – simple and practical guidelines for living. What is the nature of my suffering? At its source, my suffering comes from an addicted, angry and ignorant mind. How did it get to be like that? Through the deep conditioning imprinted on my mind, which has been going on for countless previous lifetimes. This is what is meant by karma. Do I want this painful conditioning? No.

#### THE HISTORY OF LAM RIM

The "graduated path" (*Lam-rim*) tradition began with the Indian saint Lama Atisha, who wrote the first graduated path text, "*Lamp of the Path to Enlightenment*" (*Lam gyi dron ma*). This tradition places all the various teachings of the Buddha in a graduated order, for an individual practitioner to practice "step by step." All the schools of Tibetan Buddhism have similar teachings and texts. A similar comprehensive text exists in the Nyingma tradition, composed by the saint Longchenpa. In the Kagyu tradition, there is the "*Jewel Ornament of Liberation*" composed by the saint Gampopa. And in the Sakya tradition, there are the teachings of the Lam-dre (the path and the fruit). But the most famous Lam-rim text was written by the Tibetan saint Je Tsongkhapa. His "*Great Lam-rim*" (*Lam-rim chen-mo*), which he completed in 1402, is more than 1,000 pages in length.

Do others want their suffering? No. This is what is meant by renunciation: not wanting such suffering.

These strange Buddhist words — "karma," "renunciation," "samsara" — describe common human experiences. Karma works in the same way as Pavlov's dogs. They salivated when he rang a bell because they thought their next meal was arriving. We react impulsively, unthinkingly, when someone pushes our buttons. Pavlov showed how this was done in one lifetime. Buddha pointed out how it functions across many lifetimes.

Renunciation simply means that we've had enough of this endless cycling of conditioned, addictive living.

Samsara refers to our state of mind when we still do not have sufficient control of our minds and sufficient understanding to get rid of the compulsions and addictions. Nirvana is the state of our mind when we can get rid of these things.

We change our minds by working from what we already have, just as the Olympic athlete must necessarily start with an untrained body. So *lam rim* teaches us how to strengthen our mind. This is called meditation. It teaches us methods to change the way we think about problems. This is called thought transformation and has much in common with rational-emotive and cognitive therapies. It teaches us ways of living that bring peace to ourselves and to others: by not harming others, by living ethically, by being generous, by developing patience, by wishing others to be relieved of all their suffering (that is, compassion) and that they may have everlasting happiness (that is, loving kindness). We begin to receive benefits even in the short term as we become nicer people to live with, and people are more likely to enjoy our company.

Ultimately, the power of *lam rim* to transform us from selfish, compulsive, addictive beings to buddhas lies in its teaching on the nature of reality – or "emptiness". When we fully understand this teaching then we have no cause for generating any negative behaviour or thoughts. The teachings on emptiness completely undermine all reasons for our negative patterns, and we begin to see our existence as something relative, not something absolute.

At the same time, all those things we desire or fear or hate can be seen from this relative aspect. We begin to realise how much we see our world through inner glasses that contaminate our perception of reality. As those inner glasses gradually become clean, a sense of joy and peace arises. Together with this joy and peace

arises a great sadness that other people are caught unwittingly in their private prisons more powerful than any external prison that man can build.

It is not difficult to see how strong the motivation becomes to relieve this suffering for oneself and also for other beings. To do this, we need to become enlightened. To become enlightened, we need to study and meditate and receive teachings on the great religious books of this world from the great religious teachers. ☸

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**ATISHA'S LAMP  
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