

GRADUAL AWAKENING

THE TIBETAN BUDDHIST PATH OF BECOMING FULLY HUMAN

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foreword by Geshe Tenzin Zopa



sounds true
BOULDER, COLORADO

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INSPIRATION

STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

If I have seen further than others, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.

SIR ISAAC NEWTON, letter to Robert Hooke, February 15, 1675

Enlightenment is possible—*for everyone*. However, I don't think we will all awaken spontaneously in the way contemporary spiritual teachers Krishnamurti or Eckhart Tolle did. Most of us will never experience a voice from on high, a flash of life-altering insight, stigmata, or a transcendent miracle. Anything is possible, but the odds are not in our favor. What these teachers experienced is like winning the lottery.

Yet, from the Buddhist perspective, most of us have already won the lottery: against all probability, we have been born as human beings with intact senses and a bit of interest in pursuing something spiritual. This is even more remarkable when we consider the obstacles and temptations of our materialistic culture, in which spirit is thrown out with the bathwater of religious dogma, God is proclaimed dead, consciousness is reduced to epiphenomena of the brain, and life's purpose is made a hedonic scramble on a treadmill to nowhere. What is far more likely than sudden enlightenment is gradual awakening. Following a systematic educational process like a college curriculum, gradual awakening builds on incremental insights into who we truly are, learning to care for ourselves and others, and discovering creative ways to engage the problems we all face. This gradual process of awakening doesn't offer an escape hatch to another realm of reality or disavow our human wounds, limits, and foibles in this realm; rather it embraces and transforms them, because *the only way out is through*.

The Gradual Path, or Lam Rim, Tibetan Buddhism's alternative to instantaneous awakening, serves as the backbone of this book. In the style of Joseph Campbell's monomyth *The Hero's Journey*, the Lam Rim method is ancient and relevant, spiritual and scientific, and complete and systematic—holding a comprehensive set of universal insights, meditative arts, and practical tools I have spent my entire adult life studying and making as accessible to modern Westerners as it was thousands of years ago to the Asian cultures of its origin. After two decades of exploration, critical self-reflection, and refinement, I'm prepared to share what I've learned. I don't claim to be awakened, to be a guru, or even to be someone special, but I do assert that the Gradual Path is a unique teaching that can progressively awaken *you*, and through you, this planet. The Lam Rim has saved my life and the lives of the clients and students I have had the privilege to work with, and it could save yours.

Much (if not all) of my spiritual growth was cultivated and punctuated by my encounters with a succession of incredible teachers. A qualified mentor is essential as we find our way from suffering to freedom, from spiritual darkness to the transcendent light of Divinity. This is one of the primary themes of this book. As I look at my mentors, I don't necessarily think they've all reached the pinnacle of enlightenment—although I could be wrong—but they do seem to be living more meaningful and fulfilling lives than most people. They've evolved through their commitment to the Gradual Path, which has been handed down in an unbroken lineage from teacher to student, from Buddhist Master Atisha in the eleventh century to Je Tsongkhapa in the fifteenth century, all the way to the current Dalai Lama, and from him to my mentors—Robert Thurman and Joseph Loizzo.

My intention, alongside theory and practice, is to share my story by focusing on a unique, although often misunderstood, aspect of Tibetan Buddhism called guru yoga, or mentor bonding. I've marked the milestones of my own hero's journey by my fortunate encounters with remarkable guides and the generous, life-affirming gifts they bestowed upon me. Westerners tend to have a cultural resistance

toward gurus, a carryover from a legacy of religious manipulation and broken trust, so rather than shy away from the topic of gurus with distaste and suspicion, I'd like to engage it in a practical, therapeutic way by inquiring into and working through hang-ups and unfavorable associations. When I first encountered Buddhism, like many Westerners, I had a weird, unhealthy mix of guru idealization and guruhobia. This might resonate for you as well. That's okay. It's understandable to be concerned, given our culture's overemphasis on independence that leaves us bereft of guidance. This lack of guidance has led us to idealize the elder archetype on one hand, whereas the history of religious hypocrisy and misuse of power has left us suspicious and critical on the other. However, we are missing an enormous opportunity if we deny ourselves a wholesome, mature reliance on those who have evolved to what we aspire to become. As Sir Isaac Newton urged, we can evolve best by standing on the shoulders of giants, getting closer to truth by building on the discoveries of those luminaries who came before us. As you move through this book, acknowledge whatever complicated feelings arise, but see them as an opportunity to expose and work through your wounds, preconceptions, and defense adaptations, as well as the social memes and implicit propaganda of our materialistic and conformist society.

My hero's journey began when I met my first Buddhist teacher, the late Sri Lankan lay Vipassana master Acharya Godwin Samararatne. I traveled to India in 1996, when I was twenty years old, to live and study in a Burmese monastery at the site of Buddha's awakening at Bodhgaya. Although I was there for educational purposes under the auspices of Antioch University's Buddhist studies program, I truly was searching for relief from the tumult of my childhood traumas and disillusionment with modern acquisitive culture.

Godwin was not a guru, had no entourage, was not even a scholar, and did not teach philosophical complexities from a dais. Rather, he was a down-to-earth layman, a librarian who offered the simple and direct methods of mindfulness and loving-kindness—the two foundational tools of self-healing—which we all need at the outset of our path. More importantly, Godwin embodied the presence, attunement, and

guidance I had not consistently received when I was growing up, and therefore did not internalize. In Buddhist terms, Godwin was a *kalyana-mitra*—a spiritual friend and confidant—a perfect first step between my isolation and the distant peak of a guru figure, someone who could walk beside me on the path. Godwin allowed me to connect with my humanness—wounds and all—thawing the frozen pain of my wintry past in the warmth of genuine intimacy. He was a mirror clear enough to reflect and illuminate the best of myself, a healing ally who didn't judge, manipulate, or need anything from me and, therefore, was an exemplar of unconditional love.

I have two memories of experiences with Godwin that will never fade. The first occurred when he called me to his room in the monastery after I had complained about not being able to sleep, a condition that had plagued me since childhood. We spoke through the evening, sharing stories, and when it grew late he invited me to rest in his room in the attendant's bed, recommending I lie on my right side, as it is said the Buddha did when he passed from this life. I slept deeply that night for the first time in a while, but I don't think it was about posture—it was about Godwin's presence, his grace, and the effortless, platonic connection we shared. Refreshed, we rose before sunrise and walked in silence, spontaneously hand in hand, from the monastery, through the darkness, and down a dirt road to the Bodhi tree where the Buddha reached enlightenment. Sitting together in meditation under the branches, dawn broke to the resonance of monks chanting, an endless stream of prayers thousands of years old and echoing through the ages. That was the first time I came to know what the word *love* meant. The person, the place, and the moment all felt like finding home. It was pure magic.

The second experience occurred two years later. I had returned to Asia to study with Godwin at his Nilambe Buddhist Meditation Center, outside of Kandy, Sri Lanka. During the silent retreat, participants were encouraged to meditate alone outdoors for periods of time. I found a spot on a bluff overlooking the lush tea terraces I had named the Garden of Eden. It was in solitude there, bathed in sunlight, mindfully listening to the morning birdsong, that I had my first so-called

breakthrough meditation experience. My sense of self, its incessant inner monologue of self-loathing, receded and collapsed into a crystal-line *selfless* presence. I was no longer an observer noticing sound, but instead became the birdsong itself. With this dissolution of separation arose indescribable relief. Boundaries melted and a freedom emerged unlike anything I had known before.

That unifying insight—what the Zen Buddhists call *kensho*—didn't last long, yet while I was in it, it could have been eternal. When consciousness receded and I reassumed the separateness of my ordinary self, a tremendous sense of exhilaration lingered because of what I thought I had discovered. Was this awakening?

I stayed on that bluff for hours as I reflected on what had occurred. I came to see how the edifice of identity, with its past and future, hopes and fears, paired with my striving to become someone, or to gain something, and my resistance to the inevitability of not being someone or losing something, had cut me off from the precious source of life—the dynamic, unitary flow of which we are all always a part but I had failed to recognize. Rather than being separated and pitted against life, I *was* life. The struggle to which I had resigned myself, indeed that had overwhelmed me since childhood, was revealed to be mostly a mental fabrication born of the delusion of separateness. For a moment, *in meditative absorption*, I thought I had entered a holy vortex, pierced through the veil of appearances, and accessed a sacred reality. Or had I?

That evening, in my conversation with Godwin, he put my eager, inner child at ease as he explained that while these breakthrough experiences were significant, they were by no means special. Many if not most meditators, as well as those using psychedelics or engaging in ritual actions such as Sufi whirling or drum circles or creative processes, taste the freedom of the dropping away of labels and separation. Godwin cautioned me not to confuse a glimmer of oneness with the radical transformation of awakening, and he reminded me that being present with pain, loneliness, and sadness offered profound opportunities for mindfulness, loving-kindness, and insight as experiences of beauty, the heavenly, or the Divine.

The goal of spiritual practice isn't to get outside oneself, beyond our tormented natures, but to come back to the self with more spacious clarity, unconditional love, and skillful creativity. It would take me many years of Gradual Path training to understand this vital teaching Godwin pointed to, but applying it is something that continues for me. That's why I begin this book as I'll end it—with the simple but radical truth that the goal of meditation is not the relief of escape but the compassion of relationality. In other words, transcendence isn't the destination but a necessary stop to unburden fixation, so we can return to ordinary life with open minds and warmer hearts. Or, as Godwin put it, "Breaking out is only as important as how we break back in."

Godwin was so skillful in helping me frame this early experience. He kept me from deifying oneness and venerating it as one might a sacred cow, thus sparing me years of misguided chasing, grasping, and suffering. As you join me on this Gradual Path odyssey, we'll circle back to this original insight, because it is the heart and purpose of the work, which is a journey to awaken gradually to an ultimate truth through which we return to a relative world with more compassion and the means to heal others.

My fortunate encounter with Godwin was the beginning of a succession of instrumental relationships with luminaries—giants among teachers. With each successive mentor I reached a new milestone in my process of maturity. Standing on their shoulders, relying on their years of experience, and building upon their accomplishments, I came to behold the horizon of infinite possibilities I would have been too limited to see on my own.

In the chapters that follow, it'll be my pleasure to introduce you to my heroes, including Dr. Joe Loizzo, my main role model and guide through life and the first American Buddhist scholar to translate the entire Lam Rim into neuropsychological language, making it clinically relevant and accessible to Westerners. You'll meet Joe's mentor Professor Robert Thurman, the first Westerner ordained as a Buddhist monk by His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. Thurman is a champion of the Tibetan cause for freedom who

challenged the elites of academia—their Eurocentric hubris, their colonialization of knowledge, and their disenfranchising paradigm of nihilism. I'll share the experience I had with Geshe Michael Roach, said to be the first Westerner to complete the arduous twenty-year course of study in a Tibetan monastery, and explore the painful but necessary lessons learned from a guru's fall from grace, stemming from his failure to deal with personal trauma. You'll also meet Lama Zopa Rinpoche, a far-out character who operates in what I call "Zopa Standard Time," has all the marks and signs of a fully realized master, and renewed my conviction that a complete awakening is possible. Along with Lama Zopa you'll meet his ever-devoted yet humble protégé Geshe Tenzin Zopa, a dynamic teacher who is my age. Raised on the wisdom of the Tibetan high lamas of Kopan Monastery since he was a toddler, Tenzin Zopa stole my heart, made me want to become a better man, and modeled the practice of guru devotion. Finally, you'll meet Lama Je Tsongkhapa himself, fifteenth-century scholar-sage, epitome of the Lam Rim, author of our sacred text, chief architect of this book's structure, and living exemplar for the whole succession of mentor beings who have blessed us and allowed us to access the reality of possibilities that exists beyond our immediate sense perception. On behalf of all my mentors and the lineage we uphold, it is to Tsongkhapa we pay our deepest salutations.

In every one of us is a child who hopes myths, mysteries, and dreams can come true. They can, and they have. May the pages that follow and the wisdom teachings I've gathered inspire you to walk the Gradual Path on your quest to become fully human. May any errors you find be solely attributed to my limitations, blind spots, and misunderstandings, allowing the legacy of the Lam Rim and its wisdom-keepers to progress unblemished. May this book and any benefit you derive from actualizing these sacred teachings fulfill the wishes of all mentors and all lineages of awakening, empowering us all to face the enormous challenges of our world with greater confidence, creativity, and collaboration. May all spiritual mentors live long and teach widely, and may we never be separated until samsara ends.

Thirty-Step Road Map

Because every hero needs a map before they set out on a journey, here is our Lam Rim Road Map of the Hero's Thirty Steps to Awakening:

- 1 Create a sacred space.
- 2 Set up an altar and make offerings.
- 3 Prepare your body and mind.
- 4 Evoke the mentor and the Jewel Tree refuge field.
- 5 Initiate the Seven-Step Mentor-Bonding Process:
 - i Admire qualities
 - ii Make offerings
 - iii Disclose negativities
 - iv Rejoice virtues
 - v Request guidance
 - vi Request presence
 - vii Dedicate merits
- 6 Offer the mandala and final prayers.
- 7 Find a mentor.
- 8 Become a suitable student.
- 9 Preciousness of human life inspires appreciation.
- 10 Death inspires urgency.
- 11 Refuge offers evolutionary safe-direction.
- 12 Causality inspires agency.
- 13 Defects of samsara inspire distaste in compulsive existence.
- 14 Renunciation (aspiration to be free)—the milestone of evolutionary self-care.

- 15 Equanimity balances social reactivity.
- 16 Recognize all beings as kin—inspires solidarity.
- 17 Remember their kindness—inspires gratitude.
- 18 Resolve to repay their kindness—inspires reciprocity.
- 19 Equalize self and other—inspires empathy.
- 20 Contemplate disadvantages of self-preoccupation and take on suffering—inspires compassion.
- 21 Contemplate the benefits of altruism and give care—inspires love.
- 22 Take responsibility and aspire to save all beings—inspires purpose.
- 23 Bodhicitta (aspiration to free others)—the milestone of radical altruism.
- 24 Perfect generosity.
- 25 Perfect virtue.
- 26 Perfect patience.
- 27 Perfect effort.
- 28 Perfect concentration.
- 29 Perfect wisdom—the milestone of quantum view.
- 30 Manifestation (using MAPS):
 - i **M**aturity
 - ii **A**cceptance
 - iii **P**ossibility
 - iv **S**eeding