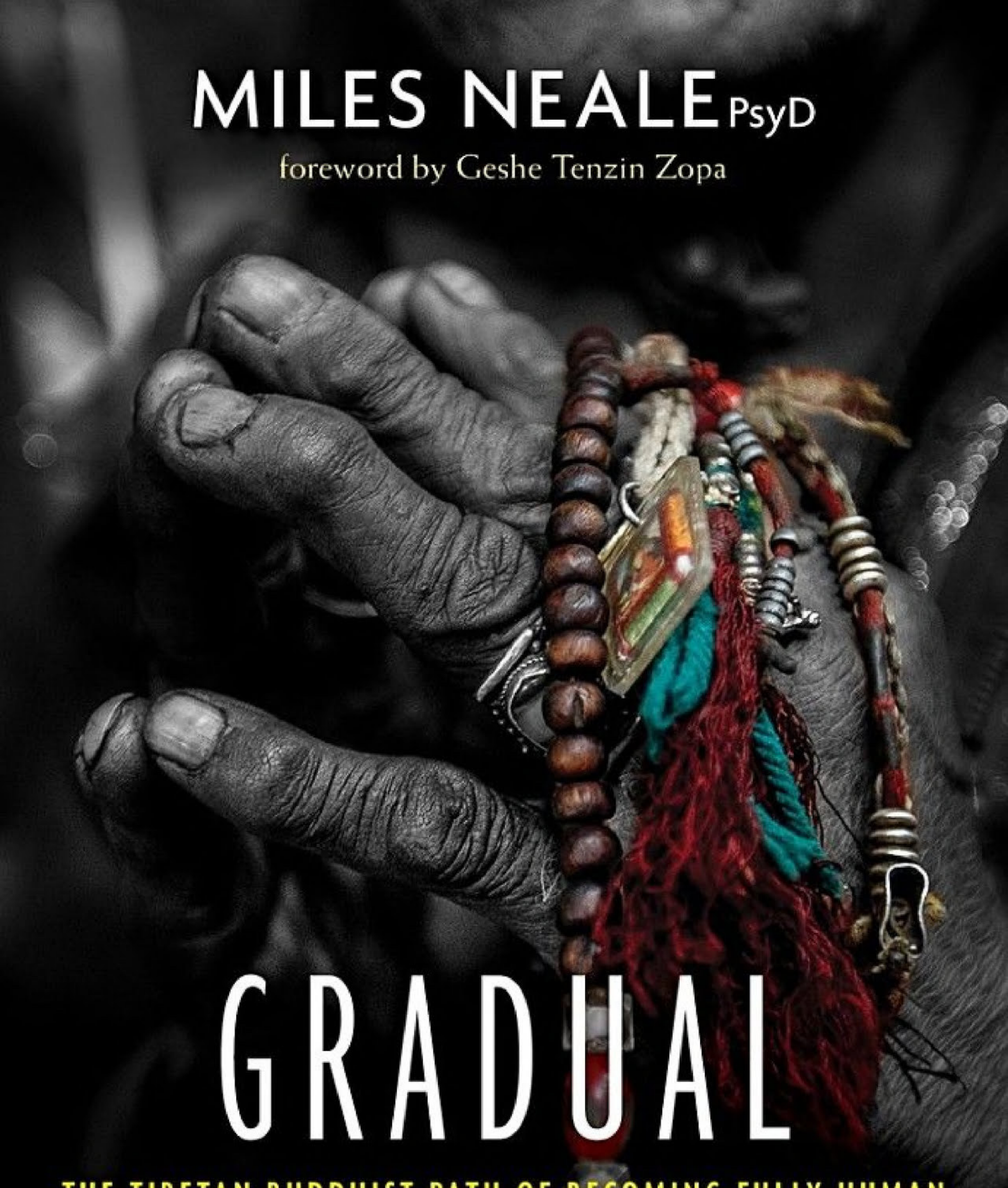
MILES NEALE PsyD

foreword by Geshe Tenzin Zopa



GRADUAL AWAKENING

THE TIBETAN BUDDHIST PATH OF BECOMING FULLY HUMAN

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. The great eleventh-century Nalanda pandit Lama Atisha understood this well, and with a mighty heart of wise compassion he set out to marshal the Buddha's eighty-four thousand teachings—found in hundreds of scriptures and thousands of verses—into a logical, sequential, and practical road map to help guide spiritual seekers on the path, from ordinariness to liberation on to full and final awakening. This unique style of teaching came to be called Lam Rim, or the Gradual Path to Enlightenment, and, attesting to its beauty and effectiveness, has been preserved in all lineages and schools of Tibetan Buddhism for the past thousand years.

One of the unique features of the Lam Rim is that it recognizes an alternative to the path of sudden, spectacular enlightenment and instead proposes a more modest, gradual awakening. From the beginning of Tibet's history of receiving dharma transmissions from India, with the great debates involving the eighth-century Indian scholar Kamalashila, it was clear that for the masses the gradual process of studying, contemplating, and embodying insights over the course of a sustained, lifelong practice would be most appropriate and beneficial. While all methods have their validity and are useful for practitioners of various dispositions, the gradual approach explained in these pages is as relevant to modern students as it was to Tibetans centuries ago.

According to Lama Je Tsongkhapa (1357–1419), the essence of the entire path to awakening can be distilled into three main realizations: *renunciation*, the mind that relinquishes distortions, afflictive emotions, and compulsions, as well as their unfavorable results; *Bodhicitta*, the mind set on awakening for the benefit of others; and *wisdom*, the mind that directly perceives the ultimate reality of emptiness and interdependence. This book presents those three essential realizations along with contemplation topics and meditation techniques designed to ease their integration.

Gradual Awakening is generously offered by the learned teacher and psychologist Dr. Miles Neale, who has devoted himself to scientific and Buddhist philosophical training for the past twenty years, and whose life is a living example of the Bodhisattva conduct that the Lam Rim teachings were intended to manifest in all of us. Along with sophisticated philosophical insights and complex visualization practices, I am happy to see that Dr. Neale has also presented some of the traditional Tibetan rituals, prayers, and liturgy. Rather than abandoning these cultural aspects to make the Lam Rim more accessible to the West, Dr. Neale has used neuroscience and other familiar Western psychological concepts, as well as personal stories, to reveal their deeper meaning, make them relevant to a wider audience, and ensure their vitality is preserved during the current wave of the dharma's cross-cultural transmission.

Dr. Neale and I have studied the Lam Rim from a common source and lineage that have been realized, preserved, and passed down directly from mind to mind for at least six hundred years, from the great early masters Lama Atisha and Je Tsongkhapa, to modern masters such as Pabongkhapa Déchen Nyingpo, Lama Yeshe, and Geshe Lama Konchog, all the way to our current gurus His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Kyabje Lama Zopa Rinpoche. Despite the reproducible nature of the Lam Rim teachings that have continued unbroken over the centuries, there remains room for flexibility, ingenuity, and skillful adaptation. I very much enjoy Dr. Neale's fresh interpretation of the profound Lam Rim teachings that he has thoughtfully and respectfully

examined through the perspectives of neuroscience and psychotherapy. Because of his long years of committed study, practice, teaching, and synthesis done with a sincere, altruistic motivation, I trust this book will reach many people who might otherwise not have had the fortune to be exposed to and to derive benefit from the dharma.

Furthermore, I am delighted with the manner in which Dr. Neale turned this book, along with its companion audio compilation of guided meditations, both published by Sounds True, into a vehicle to raise awareness and support for the nuns of Khachoe Ghakyil Ling Nunnery—the largest Tibetan Buddhist nunnery in Nepal—in order that they might pursue their wish to study dharma and reach enlightenment. This is an unbelievable act of generosity, and it shows that Dr. Neale has a deep understanding of the teachings on karma, emptiness, and compassion that are at the heart of the Lam Rim. I rejoice in his meritorious activities, and I pray that this book serves you well on your gradual journey of awakening and that the dharma continues to flourish in the West.

For more than 2,500 years, wherever across the planet Buddhism has been transplanted, it has influenced and been influenced by the dominant worldviews and practices of the various cultures it has entered. This continues to be the case as Buddhism migrates West and engages with the powerful disciplines of science, medicine, and psychology. As we all know, the world is facing many challenges—economic, sociopolitical, and environmental—and greater interfaith and interdisciplinary dialogue among different groups is critical if we are to build bridges, create harmony, deepen understanding, and collaborate to find solutions. In light of this, I am particularly pleased by the work of Dr. Neale and his colleagues at the Nalanda Institute for Contemplative Science, who are offering a bridge across time and space, between East and West, ancient and modern, spiritual and scientific, so that we might all share and receive mutual benefit from the rich cultural perspectives, techniques, and technologies of one another.

May these teachings benefit numberless sentient beings as vast as space and sow the karmic seeds of enlightenment in everyone fortunate enough to encounter them.

May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness.
May all beings be free from suffering and the causes of suffering.
May all beings never be separated from the supreme happiness of enlightenment.
May all beings abide in equanimity, free from clinging to close ones and aversion to others.

With sincere prayers for all,

GESHE TENZIN ZOPA
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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 guruphobia. 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 crystalline *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

1 INITIATION

EMBARKING ON THE GRADUAL PATH

We have *not* even to risk the adventure alone, for the heroes of all time have gone before us. The labyrinth is thoroughly known. We have only to follow the thread of the hero path, and where we had thought to find an abomination we shall find a god. And where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves. Where we had thought to travel outward, we will come to the center of our own existence. And where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL, *The Power of Myth*

I am as much an enthusiast of all things Tibetan Buddhist as I am a critic of modern, materialistic culture. I coined the term "McMindfulness" because I've grown uncomfortable with the ways we Westerners exploit, capitalize on, and reinforce people's fantasies about happiness and escaping pain by giving them watered-down spiritual practices in sexy marketed packages. We've cherry-picked teachings from ancient, mostly threatened, wisdom cultures and mass-marketed them as consumerist goods in the guise of a panacea, particularly now as we teeter on the edge of evolutionary survival as a species. Yes, I understand the argument that soft entry-points and bite-sized morsels welcome people to explore and find the deeper dimensions of spirituality and the rigorous contemplative science that underpins stripped-down versions of meditation and yoga practice. However, I also believe there needs to be some pushback against our culture's appetite for the spectacular, for its Eurocentric hubris, shortsightedness, and hedonism. I don't mind taking an unpopular, critical stance on how superficial, misguided, and Kardashian we have become and how dangerous the capitalist agenda is. The short version: it's killing us.

I'll put my position as bluntly as I can here: *Any meditation practice that fails to address our culture's distorted worldview of scientific reductionism grounded in nihilism, and its equally misguided offshoots—materialism, hedonism, imperialism, neoliberal capitalism, and consumerism—that constitute the current zeitgeist, and fails to connect them directly to our society's mental health pandemic, general apathy, and the broader plight of our planet-in-peril is dangerous. Any such approach is the equivalent of encouraging people to rearrange the furniture when their house is on fire.*

Our distorted, impoverishing worldview—what I call our *sickness of paradigm*—is resistant to feel-good attempts to quiet the mind and relax the body, and it requires a *paradigm therapy* capable of uprooting the fundamental internal causes of human suffering while ushering in a global renaissance of science and spirit that can reestablish the sustainable well-being that we have lost touch with in industrial society. This book presents such a therapy—not a simple technique extracted from an exotic but "primitive" culture, not another mindfulness-based intervention fitting like a square peg in the square hole of our reductionist worldview, but a complete system unto itself. It's an in-depth, multidimensional exploration of what is called the Gradual Path to Enlightenment—the Lam Rim—that not only challenges our sickness of paradigm but could heal it completely.

In my estimation, combining Tibet's deep psychology, meditative techniques, and virtuous rituals offers far more transformational potential than merely sitting quietly following the breath. The chapters that follow serve as a practical training manual that will allow you to experiment with and actualize the benefits of role-modeling visualization, affirmations, contemplative themes, textual recitation, prayers, altars, offerings, and, of course, meditation. My teacher Geshe Tenzin Zopa defines meditation as a process of "familiarizing the mind with virtue," which I know isn't the way most people understand meditation in our mainstream Western culture, and that's my point. *We don't get it . . . yet.* We don't see the whole picture of what meditation is, where it comes from, how it works, and what it was designed to do. Meditation was developed for human liberation, not mere stress reduction or symptom relief. How mainstream Western culture approaches meditation is analogous to using a rocket launcher to light a candle.

This book is no more about converting anyone to Buddhism than a textbook on mathematics is about asking readers to believe in a higher, abstract power. You don't have to be "converted" in order for math's principles to be observable, to be applicable, and to cause an intended outcome. The same is true of this book. The world doesn't need more Buddhists vying for religious market share, but it does need radical healing and an accelerated global awakening of consciousness. Neither of these things can happen within dogmatic religion or equally rigid scientism, both of which discount our personal power. Nor can we hope to genuinely awaken ourselves through lightweight, pseudospiritual self-help that may be alluring but does not offer sustenance.

We'll need to level up and commit to something with substance and depth that can feed us, because a human being's complexity is only matched by the tenacity of our blindness and affliction, both of which inevitably withstand most attempts at change despite our sincere wish for transformation. The diluted and ungrounded dissemination of New Age teachings and DIY spirituality popular in the modern West can't compete with the refined and time-tested wisdom of ancient cultures. If you have found your way to the original teachings of Kabbalah, Sufism, Christianity, shamanism, the First Nations healers, or the way-finders of Polynesia, you have returned to a source of knowledge that still holds sacred insights and nourishing practices serving the same purpose as the ones I've compiled in this book. If you have found your way to basic mindfulness meditation or hatha yoga postures, then from there I'll take you to their source in Tibetan Buddhism and the contemplative science of India. If you've already dived into the vast ocean of Tibetan teachings, then perhaps my neuropsychological spin on things will help deepen your faith or nuance your understanding.

Reading this book may be the first step on *your* hero's journey, or it may serve to elucidate and help you navigate a path you have already embarked upon. For me, this book is many things—a gift, an invitation, and a practical manual among others. It represents the scars and breakthroughs I sustained during my odyssey toward personal healing and growth as a psychotherapist and Buddhist teacher. It's also a legacy I aspire to impart to my sons and perhaps your kids as well, so that they can all inherit a more sane and sustainable world and learn to be fully human again—wisdom-keepers of history's great spiritual lineages, altruistic warriors of love, and guardians of a planet that needs to be restored to balance.

Before you dismiss the thesis of this book, remember that the way we've been living in the West for several centuries, as if God is "dead," is directly connected to the fact that the ice caps are melting, lingering wars are now good business, and we ignore the vulnerable. I have made it my life's work to go beyond the superficialities of McMindfulness, to return to and revitalize the ancient, vast, and profound teachings of the Gradual Path's full-spectrum approach to contemplative practice. Using neuroscience as a bridge, we can return to "spirit" and integrate teachings and insights often disparaged and abandoned in favor of our culture's yearning for industrial progress. I hope you'll hang in with me long enough to consider how Lam Rim can play a

part in the overall solution—not just for your life but for our world. I invite you to reconnect with an old-school science and set of practices in a relevant, meaningful, and fulfilling way.

The Hero: An Archetype for Our Time

Drawing from Buddhism and psychology—the traditions that have become the twin domains of my heart's passion—I'll begin by defining a key term in my teachings and this book: the hero. The archetype of the hero in Tibetan Buddhism is a Bodhisattva, an evolved being motivated by profound compassion for the suffering of others who vows to reach complete awakening. Bodhisattvas who pursue the Gradual Path follow a succession of training steps through stages of psychological development and reach specific milestones, or realizations, along the way to enlightenment. Both physicists discovering the ultimate nature of reality and poet-activists, Bodhisattvas generate love and compassion as practical and constructive forces to skillfully redesign the matrix of interdependence we all share.

I often refer to the great mythologist and American author Joseph Campbell (1904–1987) in this book. He used the designation of "hero" to describe individuals who embark on the monumental psychological task of expanding and evolving consciousness and famously charted this journey. This hero's journey begins in our inherent state of blindness, separation, and suffering and progresses on a circular (as opposed to linear) route made up of stages shared by myths and legends spanning all cultures and epochs. From Buddha to Christ, Arjuna to Alice in Wonderland, the hero's journey is one of passing through a set of trials and phases: seeking adventure, encountering mentors, slaying demons, finding treasure, and returning home to heal others.

Tibetan Buddhism's and Campbell's descriptions of the hero both offer a travel-tested road map of a meaningful life, a path to becoming fully human—we don't have to wander blindly, like college kids misguidedly hazed by a fraternity, or spiritual seekers abused in the thrall of a cult leader. The hero archetype is relevant to each of us, irrespective of our background, gender, temperament, or challenges, because we each have a hero gene within us capable of following the path, facing trials, and awakening for the benefit of others. Becoming a hero is what the Lam Rim describes as taking full advantage of our precious human embodiment. It's what Campbell saw as answering the call to adventure and following our bliss—not the hedonic bliss of chasing a high or acquiring more stuff, but the bliss of the individual soul, which, like a mountain stream, reaches and merges with the ocean of universal reality.

A Seismic Paradigm Shift

How did we get so fucked up? Why is the hero such an important archetype? Why is the journey of awakening, to heal others, so relevant? Western materialist culture was spawned in Europe less than three centuries ago during the age of reason, a reaction to fundamental and dogmatic Christianity, which stifled the individual's sense of self-determination and forced them to adhere through faith alone to hierarchical and often corrupt systems of centralized religious power. In the eighteenth century, reliance upon religion shifted in favor of logic. Freed from the mandates of the Church, educated individuals had the ability to pursue and manifest personal destiny, liberating the power of the intellect and the left brain. This movement produced radical and valuable breakthroughs in society and science—particularly the dissemination of information through the printing press. However, as we gained freedom with this seismic shift, we lost something vital to human identity and our survival as a species. Like a ship cut from its mooring, we began to drift too far from that which is beyond our five sense perceptions—the spirit.

Derived from the Latin word for breath, *spirit* is the ephemeral source, the energetic vitality

that subsumes matter. It is the breath of life. Since the dawn of civilization, spiritual activities—the stuff of mystery, myth, communion, ritual, and dreams—have been the way people made sense of life's uncertainty and chaos, finding meaning and purpose when there appeared to be none, and consciously (and, as we now believe, epigenetically) driving evolution toward flourishing, beyond the instinctual imperatives for basic survival.

By reestablishing the individual and entirely displacing God with science, we risk erecting another false idol—scientism grounded in nihilism—with its own dogma and colonization of knowledge, ordaining scientists as new high priests. If we accept without further consideration the claims that Philip Morris, Pfizer, or Monsanto makes about its products, using only its own research as evidence, we're as naive as the pious who relied solely on the Church for guidance and information during the Middle Ages. Psychologist and author John Welwood summarizes well the cost of secular progress, particularly industrialization, as it relates to our neuropsychological attachment styles and ability to connect with others:

> In contrast to the indigenous cultures of traditional Asia . . . most of us suffer from an extreme degree of alienation and disconnection that was unknown in earlier times—from society, community, family, older generations, nature, religion, tradition, our body, our feelings, and our humanity itself.[1]

Society's increasingly visible and abject suffering is the result of having abandoned its connection to the realm of spirit. If you're anything like me, you're angry about what's happening right now as our materialistic worldview and hedonic values are exported globally. The breakdown of the family and wider social bonds; the decline of ethics and morals rooted in our interconnection; the corruption and cronyism rampant in our financial and political institutions; the ever-growing divide between rich and poor; the shortsighted pillaging of finite resources and the militarization to secure what remains; the degradation of the biosphere; the extermination of species; the demise of indigenous cultures, languages, and the perennial wisdom they maintain; and the pandemic incidents of the so-called "diseases of civilization," including cancers, addiction, and depression, are all symptoms of our fragmentation and our disconnection from our bodies, emotions, values, communities, the natural world, and the spirit—*the breath of life*.

I am not naively recommending we return to a time before the age of reason—that's neither possible nor prudent given how technology, medicine, and the sciences can be forces of good. I am not opposed to science; as a Buddhist psychotherapist, I have feet in both worlds. Evolutionary neurobiology and quantum physics offer equally compelling maps of reality to complement Tibet's contemplative science and meditative methodologies. The challenge is to create a synthesis between views and methods to find the best solution. As greater interdisciplinary dialogue occurs—like the decades-long exploration among the Dalai Lama, scientists, and contemplatives of various traditions—we'll see an alternative paradigm emerge. Perhaps as we look more closely at how Tibetan Buddhism maintained both science and spirit for centuries without contradiction, we'll appreciate how they're compatible.

The irony is that today science is being used as a bridge back to spirit. More Westerners are interested in meditation today because of the mounting empirical research proving its brain and health benefits. We are being drawn back to spirit by reason. Perhaps further discoveries will reveal more about consciousness, subtle energies, and rituals that have been dismissed and abandoned as suspect metaphysics. Science as a method could then coexist with spirit within a new holistic worldview as we reintegrate the fragmented domains of analysis and contemplation, left and right brain, individual and collective well-being, the prosocial ethos of socialism and the

individual liberty of capitalism, thereby marking a new epoch—the dawn of integration.

For Every Hero, an Initiation

As Campbell pointed out, in all spiritual traditions the hero must undergo initiation and testing. These rites of passage awaken and develop latent human capacities as they mark and safely ritualize the process of maturity, empowerment, and agency among members of a group. Initiation is a way adolescent naivete and dependency ends as we develop a sense of mastery, meaning, and purpose and are reborn as adults and active, contributing members of the tribe. Vision quests, shamanic journeys, sun dances, ordinations, Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, and confirmations offer access to a time-tested method steeped in a collective body of wisdom and community that mitigates risk and gives a reproducible outcome.

Regardless of time, place, or culture, the motifs and stages of every initiation are the same. Whether symbolic or actual they include leaving home or separating from the community, facing a symbolic or literal hardship that serves as a psychological catalyst for an altered state of consciousness, and awakening as the nascent hero. The process continues with integrating and embodying wisdom, sometimes with the help of elders, priests, or shamans, and returning to the community as a mature member, active contributor, or leader. Initiation hastens development so the latent hero nature can be realized.

Sadly, the modern industrialized world has commercialized most forms of sacred ritual and rites of passage. Even funerals and weddings can seem diluted and rote. What do we gain these days—other than the immediate gratification of ego and senses—with $50,000 weddings and Disneyland-like Bar and Bat Mitzvahs? We have lost meaningful ways of marking life-phase transitions and sacred portals through which we can pass to embrace and embody a perennial knowledge. As a result, we see the youth of Western industrialized societies struggling. They may have the latest gadgets and can drive themselves to the malls, yet they are deprived of the essential opportunity to be tested and transformed, from dependent child to capable adult, from neophyte to hero. By abandoning rites of passage, we have built a culture of immaturity and widespread juvenile entitlement. Look around. How many "adults" in their forties or fifties do you know who are as self-absorbed, dependent, disempowered, and purposeless as they were when they were twelve?

In *How Soon Is Now*, author Daniel Pinchbeck contends that the process of initiation activates the prefrontal cortex, the part of our brain associated with executive function, self-reflection, self-regulation, symbolic processing, insight, morality, intuition, and transpersonal perspective. He argues that the loss of rites is an evolutionary *digression*. Pinchbeck reframes our current global ecological crisis as an attempt by the collective unconscious to create the adventitious circumstance for the emergence of higher states of consciousness. To this I would add that the crisis also offers the opportunity to master the evolutionary self-care, altruism, and creativity in the Lam Rim. In other words, our collective psyches are self-sabotaging as if to recreate a new trial by fire that would transform us into heroes emboldened by crisis.

History of the Gradual Path

Before we embark on the Gradual Path, it's important to understand the historical context from which this stunning tradition and "pith" text emerged. The Buddhist teachings were first established in Tibet by the eighth-century master Padmasambhava, from Uddiyana (believed to be the modern-day Swat Valley in Pakistan), and the Indian abbot Shantarakshita of Nalanda University. They were championed by kings beginning with Trisong Detsen, whose patronage

facilitated the transmission and translation campaign that helped establish Buddhism in Tibet. Two Buddhist philosophical viewpoints were vying for supremacy in the newly receptive Himalayan region. One, from the Northern school of Chan/Zen Buddhism, espoused *subitism*, or sudden enlightenment. Adherents believed that a complete transformative insight could be reached all at once. The other view, primarily from Indian adherents of middle-way philosophy, espoused *gradualism*, or the slow and steady progression toward enlightenment.

Beginning in 792 CE, at the Council in Lhasa at Samye Monastery, representatives of the two schools engaged in a series of great philosophical debates that lasted for several *years*. The Chinese meditation master Heshang Moheyan argued for a direct, nonconceptual, and instantaneous breakthrough, while the Indian scholar Kamalashila asserted the gradual approach to realization that begins with study at the conceptual level, moves toward critical reflection, and eventually blossoms as intuitive insight. Kamalashila was victorious. Gradualism emphasizes moral discipline, ardent study of wisdom texts, and the six impeccable activities (*paramitas*) of the Bodhisattva to facilitate progressive psychological development culminating in Buddhahood. King Trisong Detsen saw this approach as being more relevant and accessible for the people of Tibet.

Even after it was decided that gradualism was preferable, there was still a problem: sharing information. It was impossible (and remember, this was the eighth century) to distribute the vast corpus of Buddhist teachings in a coherent and organized manner north from India and throughout the Tibetan Plateau. The dharma teachings (and those who could teach them) traveled the treacherous terrain of the Himalayas—the size of Texas and Alaska combined—haphazardly in bits and pieces to disparate provinces. By the eleventh century, there was much confusion about the order and context of the many Buddhist doctrines and commentaries in circulation throughout Tibet. The fact that teachings appeared to contradict each other caused considerable but understandable doubt.

ATISHA (982–1054 CE)

As a result, there was a call—or plea—from an eleventh-century Tibetan king, Jangchub-Oe, to recruit one of the great sages from India to make some clarifications. Lama Atisha Dipamkara Srijnana, an Indian pandit (scholar) and abbot of the great Nalanda University, was asked to resolve contradictions found in themes from texts and commentaries that had been disseminated for centuries throughout the Tibetan Plateau. Atisha did something that had never been done before: he organized the many streams of Buddha's teachings and corresponding realizations sequentially, clarified common misunderstandings, and showed how Buddhist themes and practices interrelate and support (rather than contradict) one another in a cohesive progression. The result was The Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment, the original, quintessential Lam Rim text—the entire road map toward enlightenment via specific steps, stages, and milestones. This became an important and widespread method of instruction and literary genre, central to the curriculum for all schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

JE TSONGKHAPA (1357–1419 CE)

Many variations of Lam Rim literature inspired by Atisha's text emerged over the centuries, but the one I'll focus on is a version by fifteenth-century scholar and yogi Lama Je Tsongkhapa. Tsongkhapa's devoted students included Gendün Druppa—the first Dalai Lama—and thus the lineage of the Dalai Lamas is traced back to him. This makes the lineage via the current Dalai Lama a direct, mind-to-mind transmission reaching all the way back to Tsongkhapa himself.

Tsongkhapa is a revolutionary and renaissance figure in Tibetan history. As founder of the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism, the most modern of the five classical schools (the others

being Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, and Jonang), he ushered in a new era of interest in classical Buddhist scholarship and emphasis on monastic discipline after a period of decline. He created and disseminated a more academic, scientific, morally grounded, and reproducible curriculum, making Tibetan monasteries places of spiritual learning akin to the Western university system. The teachings are academically rigorous and reproducible, rather than exclusively meditatively experiential and personal, and thus designed in the way modern universities might teach physics, mathematics, or geography.

From a mystical standpoint, it is said Tsongkhapa's purification practice and virtuous activities were exceptional and included hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of prostrations, mantras, prayers, and offerings, all of which contributed to him becoming an exceptionally realized being. He spent years in deep meditation, much of it in solitary retreat, and is said to have been in direct relationship with the Bodhisattva Manjushri, the embodiment of the Buddha's wisdom. It is through his meditation, his encounters with the subtle realms of reality, the wisdom transmission from Manjushri, and the ensuing revelations that Tsongkhapa's masterworks were written.

You may think this is all crazy fiction or indiscriminate folklore. Perhaps it is . . . *but* you may feel that way because our culture has lost a connection to magic and forgotten what humans are capable of. To be fair, the Tibetans, as well as the shamans of the Amazon and the First Nation elders, think Westerners are crazy too—so materialistic, believing only in what we perceive with our limited five senses while dismissing the rest. Some call us "orphans" because we've forsaken our connection to the Mother Earth, covering her in concrete and polluting rivers and airways the way we do our bodies. Tell me, who are the crazy ones?

REDEFINING OUR CULTURE'S ENDGAME

Think about this contextually: There was a time when we were hunter-gatherers. Life was about survival and we weren't as concerned with existential meaning and purpose. Then, during the Neolithic Era, as we became agrarians, culture and society evolved. Agriculture created surplus, and that surplus brought leisure time. We started exploring the outer world and studying the stars, and we started studying our internal universe—our minds. This led to profound self-discoveries and social developments, as well as spiritual inquiry culminating with the great sages of the Axial Age—Buddha, Homer, Zoroaster, and Lao Tzu—who offered humanity access to its own capacity for awakening and personal experiences of nature, the cosmos, the Divine.

Fast-forward to the present. What has happened in our postindustrial society is that we've cut ourselves off from our spiritual inclination, from inner exploration, and have become exclusively externally directed. All we're doing now is creating surplus for the sake of creating more surplus, with no inherent meaning or purpose. We're chasing money to make more, with no clear goals beyond acquisition and physical comfort. Instead of using these means for an altruistic end, the means have become the end. No wonder we're confused, starved, and apathetic.

The Tibetans may not have had sophisticated urban infrastructure and advanced technology, democracy, and allopathic medicine like we developed in Europe through science and the conquest of matter, but according to Robert Thurman[2] there was something profound and perhaps unparalleled in human history happening as an entire culture attempted to orient itself toward awakening, and thus supported the spiritual inclination of the individual to help make sense of and maximize their precious human life. In Tibet, no cataclysmic rift between science and spirit, logic and faith, has occurred. Tibetans maintain traditions of advanced ontology, epistemology, and debate that rival Western scientific methods, and yet they were taught in tandem with metaphysics, meditation, and ritual. Tibet offers an example of a paradigm in which science and spirituality, reason and faith, coexist.

Meditation is but a critical first-person inquiry into the nature of reality that follows the same logic as our scientific method of investigation, and yet its application goes beyond materialism to include the unseen world of consciousness, positive emotions, karmic causality, subtle energy, and even spiritual entities. I'm not idealizing Tibet—not every Tibetan was enlightened by any stretch of the imagination, and Tibetan society faced challenges like any other, in particular with its patriarchal, corruptible, authoritarian theocracy, as well as its share of wars, religious manipulation, and bloodshed. But what began to happen during those specific eras when the dharma was flourishing, such as during the fifteenth century under the leadership of Tsongkhapa, was remarkable, and it offers our postmodern society that's on the brink of self-destruction something of value to consider.

With their surplus and time, Tibetans created a cultural paradigm of introspection, which meant that within a generation a critical mass of people could go to monastic universities to study *inner*, or mind, science. Thurman calls the most adept among these fortunate ones "psychonauts," who explored inner—in contrast to outer—space. These monasteries were like universities, the Harvards or Stanfords of self-discovery. A large portion of the population could attend for free and devote themselves to understanding the nature of their own mind and how to be self-liberated. At the height of their golden age, Tibetans developed a way for most people to feel a part of something meaningful—those who couldn't take the monastic path or were too old or didn't have the predilection for spiritual endeavors still contributed, and they were gratified by their part in the meaningful process of sending someone off on a hero's journey. Can you imagine that happening in the United States now? What if we redirected most of our wealth, energy, and surplus away from defense and put it into education, creating technologies and institutions that feed the human soul and usher in a paradigm that values contemplation as much as we presently value consumerism?

As human beings, we are capable of greater things than the accumulation of wealth and fulfilling our sensory desires at the expense of others. We each deserve a chance to achieve our birthright of well-being, compassion, and creativity. We can *all* realize who we are and what we are here to do. Those realizations have a formula, which is elucidated in Tsongkhapa's Great Treatise, as well as our root text, the Three Principles of the Path. It's mind-blowing; there's a whole tradition and lineage available for the conscious evolutionary development of all human beings, revealing to them what their purpose is—not a solitary purpose, but one that connects them with *all life*.

The Great Treatise

Tsongkhapa composed several renditions of the Lam Rim and is best known for the extensive version called the Lam Rim Chen Mo, which is The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment. The Lam Rim Chen Mo is a phenomenal text—a crown jewel of world spiritual literature containing within its vast volumes everything, in perfect sequential order, that we'll ever need to become fully human if we are willing to commit to a slow but systematic, lifelong process. Everything.

The primary text in this book, the Three Principles of the Path, is a poetic distillation of Tsongkhapa's Great Treatise. It is composed as a letter to a friend and condensed into fourteen verses. Think about that: fourteen verses that hold the *entire* path to enlightenment, through which we can realize ultimate reality. It is the work of a fully realized master, a Buddha, generated for our practical benefit. Much like a codex, every word can be extrapolated and made into a teaching itself.

As a way of initiating you into the Gradual Path, I invite you to recite Tsongkhapa's text, artfully translated by my mentor Joe Loizzo. Please don't approach it with an analytical mind—that comes

later as we unpack the verses. Instead, lead with the heart, see the text as a song or poem to chant aloud, and let the vibrations and evocations stimulate emotions, memories, and images.

Three Principles of the Path

Homage to all Spiritual Mentors!

[In this brief text] I'll explain as best I can 1
The quintessence of all Buddha's teachings—
The path revealed by his noble heirs,
As the crossing for fortunate freedom seekers.

Listen with open minds you lucky people 2
Who break the addiction to worldly pleasures,
And work to give leisure and opportunity meaning,
Trusting the path that satisfies Buddhas.

The drive to survive binds all embodied beings, 3
And no cure can stem the pleasure seeking
Tides of mere survival but real transcendence,
So first of all, work to renounce [mindless pleasure]!

Leisure and opportunity are hard to find, 4
And a lifespan leaves no time to waste—reflect on this
And you'll counter the obsessions of a worldly life.
Compulsive action and reaction inexorably cause
Future cycles of pain—repeatedly contemplate this
And you'll counter obsession with an afterlife.

With practice, your mind won't entertain 5
Even passing fantasies of mundane wealth or fame,
But will aim for freedom day and night—
Then you've developed transcendence!

Since transcendence without altruistic resolve 6
Can't yield the collective happiness
Of [a Buddha's] full enlightenment,
The wise conceive the spirit of altruism.

Swept away by the torrents of birth, illness, aging, and death, 7
Tightly bound by the chains of relentless compulsion,
Imprisoned in the iron cage of self-protectiveness,
All caught up in the blinding shroud of delusion,

Endlessly living and reliving the cycle of trauma, 8
Constantly suffering in body, speech, and mind,
Such is the state of beings, all dear as mothers—
So from your natural response build heroic resolve!

Even though you practice renunciation 9
And cultivate altruistic resolve,
Without the wisdom to realize reality,
You can't cut the root of traumatic life—
So, work at the art of seeing relativity.

Who sees the inexorable causation of everything 10
Whatsoever—mundane and transcendent—
And shreds any hint of reification,
So, enters the path that satisfies Buddhas.

Appearance is invariably relative 11
And emptiness is devoid of conviction—
So long as these two insights dawn separately,
You've not yet realized the Buddha's intent.

But when they appear simultaneously, without alternation, 12
From the slightest unbiased insight of relativity
Corrective knowledge breaks the reifying habit,
And your search for genuine insight is complete.

From then on, all appearance dispels absolutism, 13
And each emptiness eliminates nihilism—
Seeing how emptiness dawns as causation,
You're no longer blinded by biased views.

So once you realize the vital points 14
Of these three principles of the path,
Resort to solitude and persistent effort—
You'll quickly reach the timeless goal, child!

One of the beautiful things about this text is that it's for newcomers to Tibetan Buddhism and masters alike—the perfect first step on the complete path to enlightenment. My hope is that as you work your way through this book, you will return to Tsongkhapa's words regularly, like a daily recitation practice, until the verses become internalized, allowing the blessings of lineage and the wisdom to which these words point to kindle the spark of insight within you, revealing what was revealed to Tsongkhapa when he wrote it—ultimate reality itself.

Three Principles of the Lam Rim

In Tibetan, *rim* means "gradual," "staged," or "successive"—as in a terraced rice field, rungs on a ladder, or phases of development. *Lam* means "path" but also implies "realization." The text you've read contains all the realizations (lam), in stages (rim), for someone traversing the hero's path to enlightenment. These realizations and stages include preciousness of human life, inevitability of death, refuge, causality, defects of unconscious life, renunciation, altruistic intent, and so forth—a road map of thirty in all that I cover in this book. As we'll see, the intelligence of the sequencing is sublime. It's like a chord progression in music, or a posture sequence in Vinyasa yoga.

"Lam Rim" becomes the "Stages of the Path to Enlightenment" and suggests the progressive sequence of realizations that human beings undergo in an optimal evolution. The process of

awakening gradually—that's what I'm presenting in this book: the Tibetan Buddhist psychology of human development, preserved for a thousand years in a university-style curriculum and passed in an unbroken lineage from teacher to student via close mentor bonds, mind to mind, from Tsongkhapa through a succession of masters to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, to Professor Robert Thurman, and, recently, to my mentor Dr. Joseph Loizzo.

In 1999, I met my main guide along the Lam Rim, Joe Loizzo, the contemplative psychiatrist and Buddhist scholar, at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, where he was teaching a meditation-based clinical program inspired by Jon Kabat-Zinn's Eight-Week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction. Joe wore his signature black beret as he guided patients through a vibrant Tibetan-style visualization bookended by the sweet chimes of Tibetan bells. In his visionary brilliance, Joe had developed a protocol to include a full range of topics and meditative practices drawn from the wider Indo-Tibetan tradition. It covertly followed the Lam Rim style that progresses beyond simple mindfulness instruction and self-healing principles to compassion training, social psychology, and embodied practices associated with the subtle body science and power tools of the Tantras (Tibet's esoteric practices). This became the flagship protocol of the Center for Meditation and Healing at the Columbia University Medical Center's department of psychiatry. It is the world's first clinical protocol to incorporate the full array of Buddhist insights and skills forming the entire arc of awakening preserved and espoused in the Indo-Tibetan tradition, and it led to the founding of New York City's Nalanda Institute for Contemplative Science.

To my novice eyes, Joe's approach was elegant, sophisticated, and mesmerizing, and his method drew me in like an irresistible gravitational force. With each successive program Joe taught, I learned the stages of the path and saw how they anticipated and informed the trajectory of my development. Like a pianist practicing scales before a recital, I saw in my life, and in those of the patients Joe (and eventually I) worked with in the hospital setting, a sustainable progression from one contemplative theme to another, from one psychological breakthrough to another, along the hero's arpeggio of self-care, altruism, and insight (the structure of this book).

More valuable than what Joe taught through words was the living example and energetic presence he embodied. The themes he presented were accompanied by a subtle process of psychological internalization. Humans and other mammals do this naturally, maturing through proximity, mimicry, and role-modeling, absorbing qualities of their caregivers for better or worse. Joe became a new parent to my inner child, so I could disidentify from my damaged self-view and embrace new qualities of self-love and confidence. I owe him my life. Two decades later, not only am I the assistant director of Nalanda Institute, working with Joe to develop and offer a whole array of programs inspired by the Lam Rim, but also a more capable and flexible individual because of this mentoring relationship.

Joe has translated our primary Lam Rim text's title as the "Three Principles of the Path," but one could interpret it as "Three Principal Realizations." That's because the idea behind the true lam is that it's an insight we're embodying, not merely a path we're walking. The three paths—renunciation, compassion, wisdom—are distinct yet interconnected stages, embodied insights one actualizes *concurrently* on the way to enlightenment.

- The first realization is *renunciation*. I translate this as "self-love" or "evolutionary self-care." It is a mind-set on liberating oneself by abandoning perceptual distortions, emotional afflictions, and behavioral compulsions that create self-imposed suffering.

- The second realization is *compassion*, or Bodhicitta, translated as "awakened mind." It is a mind-set on liberating oneself for the benefit of others. It is the aspiration to evolve

fully to help all beings awaken from the nightmare of their own self-imposed suffering. Due to its immense scope and lofty ideal, I call it "radical altruism."

- The third realization is *wisdom*. Often translated as "correct view" or "emptiness," it is a mind-set that nonconceptually, directly, and accurately perceives the subtlest nature of reality beyond superficial appearances. I call it "quantum view" because it pierces through any static, atomic, independent substrate of phenomena, breaks open the material world, and offers us a therapy for our sickness of paradigm.

Through the development of these realizations, Bodhisattvas, or altruistic heroes, turn their hearts inside out, radically shifting—from egocentric to other-centric—the axis on which their world rotates. Once we see—or taste the essence of—the three principal paths, we can spend our life unpacking them, understanding how they all fit together, and embodying them. Remember, enlightenment is not a race won by the fittest among us, but a process of slow and steady assimilation accessible to all. You and I, we get a shot at awakening too—it's incredible.

How to Use This Book

The Gradual Path is an ancient cookbook for enlightenment. Not an ad hoc, freestyle "add a pinch of this and a dash of that" approach that our modern spiritual materialism encourages, but more like the method prescribed in classical French cooking, wherein a dynamic master-apprentice interaction combined with years of training in technique, discipline, and protocol ensures the soufflé will rise no matter the kitchen or the era. Self-actualized masters with no formal training, like self-taught chefs, exist, but most of us, as we pursue awakening, must embark on and complete a well-thought-out and reproducible training program with proven effectiveness.

Tsongkhapa's Great Treatise and Atisha's Lamp categorize and delineate the Gradual Path steps according to the capacity and motivation of the practitioner—spanning from those of modest capacity, who simply want greater peace in their own life now or in the future, to those of greatest capacity, who seek liberation motivated by compassion for others. However, Tsongkhapa's text, the Three Principles of the Path, which we'll use in this book, explores the steps according to the major realizations, or milestones, practitioners develop in their appropriate sequence—evolutionary self-care, radical altruism, and quantum view.

This is not a simple book—*introductory* and *simple* are not interchangeable. We'll be overlapping multiple maps and traveling a lot of terrain together—there will be insights for your left brain, meditations for your right, and rituals that will unify them. How you relate to and best benefit from this material might depend on your predisposition and learning style, so know there are three approaches:

- The forest . . . *topical approach and theoretical aspect*. Using Tsongkhapa's fourteen-verse text as a scaffolding, I introduce and unpack the Three Principles of the Path, or the major milestones of renunciation, compassion, and wisdom, which constitute the arc of the hero's journey and parallel the foundations of Tibetan Buddhism. Those who are more theoretically inclined can recite the text daily, reflect on its meaning, and internalize these milestones.

- The trees . . . *practical approach and experiential aspect*. Within the three primary milestones are the thirty steps of our road map—each a discrete contemplation—that help build inner resources and allow you to efficiently actualize the deeper realizations.

- The landscape . . . *integrative approach and spiritual aspect*. This approach serves as a *paradigm therapy*, offering a complete spiritual context in which to practice the theoretical text and the thirty steps alongside prayers, altar offerings, inspiring mentor visualizations, and mandala offerings.

This is how the Tibetans meditate: they engage in study, discourse, debate, recitations of text, contemplations, and complex visualizations, along with focused bursts of meditation to holistically assimilate and become that which they focus on. They consider hearing or reading a sacred text to be a profound type of meditation, more profound than just relaxing the mind. This is because focusing and relaxing don't change the underlying psychic program—they only suspend it, like a vacation. We need mindfulness first, to harness clarity and power, but then we need to give ourselves a better program, something positive to take in, absorb, and structure psychic reconfiguration. Our bodies become what we eat, and so too do our minds become what we think. If you watch violent television or political propaganda, you're *meditating* on hostility, fear, and paranoia and habituating and reconfiguring your nervous system. Even the harmonics of song, prayer, and mantra are significant—more than simply pleasant acoustics, neuroscience and polyvagal theory suggest that singing, chanting, praying, and even dancing and yoga postures stimulate the vagus nerve (which regulates our entire autonomic nervous system), increasing stress resilience, secure attachment, and adaptive social bonding.

Take a moment to set your intention for the journey ahead. You've been initiated into a sacred, centuries-long stream—the Lam Rim, the Gradual Path, Tibet's crowning achievement, a realistic approach to psychological maturity and awakening!

2 PREPARATION

READYING SPACE, BODY, AND MIND FOR THE JOURNEY

You must have a room, or a certain hour or so a day, where you don't know what was in the newspapers that morning, you don't know who your friends are, you don't know what you owe anybody, you don't know what anybody owes to you. This is a place where you can simply experience and bring forth what you are and what you might be. This is the place of creative incubation. At first you may find that nothing happens there. But if you have a sacred place and use it, something eventually will happen.

JOSEPH CAMPBELL, *The Power of Myth*

Clients often come to my office looking for techniques to alleviate their depression, anxiety, grief, or physical pain. They've heard that I'm a Buddhist psychotherapist and about the power of mindfulness meditation, and they want me to teach them something they can neatly put in their pocket and take home to give them relief. While there is compelling research showing that mindfulness-based approaches have a positive outcome on physical and mental conditions, and basic mindfulness is easy to learn, at the risk of disappointing them, I often *don't* teach clients meditation . . . at least not at first. There are several reasons for this, not the least of which is that no psychotherapeutic treatment can succeed without first building rapport, along with establishing interpersonal safety, familiarity, and continuity.

Humans are more than the sum of their parts. We can't treat a single organ in isolation from the entire organism any more than we can treat an individual's irrational thoughts in isolation from their history, relationships, lifestyle, ecology, culture, and genetics. Buddhism traces the root cause of suffering to misperception, sometimes translated as delusion, and affirms that the most dangerous worldview is the nihilistic one we have adopted during the centuries since spirit was thrown out with the bathwater of religion—our sickness of paradigm. Because everything is interconnected in an open life system, our nihilistic worldview has an adverse impact on how we feel, act, and relate to others. As a result, meditation training in the traditional Indo-Tibetan context is more holistic and comprehensive in addressing one's worldview, mental state, and lifestyle than the modern, secular mindfulness approach.

Six Conditions

Before we take up meditation, we must prepare to do so. There's a classic meditation manual written by the great eighth-century scholar Kamalashila—who was instrumental in disseminating the Gradual Path—that is surprisingly relevant today. His Stages of Meditation elucidates the Six Conditions, or advice, to be considered before beginning practice. It directs the secular meditator to consider "practice" in a more holistic context, wherein adjustments to one's worldview, attitude, and lifestyle are as important as the state of mind cultivated through practice and the technical instructions on how to meditate. Interestingly, with the onset of climate change, Kamalashila's

advice for contemplation could be adopted by those hoping to live more sustainably on our planet.

1 Seek a conducive environment.

2 Live simply with few needs.

3 Be satisfied with what you have.

4 Avoid being too busy.

5 Live an ethical life.

6 Give up pleasure-driven pursuits.

1 SEEK A CONDUCIVE ENVIRONMENT

Anyone who thinks their external environment plays no part in internal well-being need only sit in a cathedral or temple, or gaze at a sunset. Kamalashila lists the elements of a suitable atmosphere for meditation as safety; food and clothing; freedom from disease, malevolent forces, and toxic people; access to friendship with like-minded, well-intentioned people; and quiet with few distractions.

Safety is primary—without it, the nervous system can never fully process information, learn, and evolve. It follows that we'd want to be physically comfortable and supported by a like-minded community. When it comes to finding a suitable place to meditate, it might not be possible to go on retreat, but whether it's your local dharma center or a corner of your bedroom, the environment influences the mind, so begin to envision and create a sacred space.

2 LIVE SIMPLY WITH FEW NEEDS

This is the heart of the dilemma between a contemplative culture, in which simplicity and minimalism are cornerstones of well-being, and our consumerist culture, in which we are addicted to chasing the high of accumulating but are suffocated by all our stuff. "Live simply" is not a recommendation to return to a hunter-gatherer society; that's neither realistic nor necessary, but modern life could be radically improved if we adopted an ethos of simplicity, particularly if we hope to benefit from meditation and proceed along the Gradual Path. Part of the shift asks us to discern between what we need versus what we want, and then to work with our impulses of greed, yearning, and fear that drive us to thoughtless consumption.

3 BE SATISFIED WITH WHAT YOU HAVE

Tibetan Buddhist teaching considers satisfaction to be more an active, karmic process and less a destination. In Western culture we're influenced by media and commercials that prey on our fantasies and insecurities, convincing us that if we buy the right car, go on vacation, or meet the right partner, we'll be happy. When it doesn't work out, we are offered new enticements. Conversely, Buddhist science sees inner satisfaction as a basic capacity or skill of the mind that can be developed through introspective practice independent of external circumstance. By systematically turning attention inward and cultivating emotional balance, we can consciously recalibrate the nervous system toward safety and gratitude and away from its negativity bias. As we exercise this shift, we become less preoccupied by what we lack and more focused on

appreciating what we have, savoring while letting go, and can redirect our inner resources to meditative, eudaemonic (flourishing by way of pursuing virtue), altruistic pursuits.

4 AVOID BEING TOO BUSY

Digital overload, time-is-money multitasking, bigger-is-better culture, and how we've come to be ashamed of *not* being busy are ways we diminish our psychic inner space, distracting us at best and overwhelming us at worst. We stay busy as a pain-avoidance strategy, to tune out our inner doubts that we are worthless, unlovable, and alone, and that the world is unsafe. Busyness is an addiction like any other—an impulse of escape—yet it is prized, privileged, and reinforced in modern culture. The sickness of paradigm underpinning consumer capitalism, materialism, and nihilism keeps us in an orbit of self-perpetuating dissatisfaction and compulsive fear, robbing us of the inner space to access our inherent goodness, which can only be found when we shift from doing to being.

5 LIVE AN ETHICAL LIFE

The interrelationship between karmic causality, ethical actions, and psychological liberation will grow apparent as we progress on our hero's journey. Our actions—lifestyle—cannot be isolated from our life and how we feel, see, experience, and relate to the world and the people in it. We are all interconnected. When you enter a traditional ashram or meditation center, you are asked up-front to refrain from killing, stealing, lying, being sexually inappropriate, and clouding your mind with intoxicants. There is an assumption that the way we live either supports or contradicts our aspiration for well-being and liberation. As we become disciplined and restrain hedonic impulses, we grow sensitive and concerned about our actions, which has a positive effect on our state of mind, abating lethargy, restlessness, grasping, hostility, and self-doubt. As these afflictions subside, greater perceptual clarity becomes possible—like water in which the sediment settles when the glass is no longer agitated. That clarity fosters insight into the nature of things—or awakening—making ethics not only relevant to mental well-being but a critical foundation. From the Buddhist perspective, an ethical life is not about blind faith within the dogma of religion, rather it's the rational outgrowth of consequential thinking within a psychologically minded culture.

6 GIVE UP PLEASURE-DRIVEN PURSUITS

The ancient Greek Stoics distinguished between two orienting ambitions in life: hedonia and eudaemonia. *Hedonia* involves a life propelled by what Sigmund Freud named the "pleasure principle"—often involving indulgence and gratification of the five senses. *Eudaemonia* is the pursuit of virtue, meaning, and purpose, each for their own sake, which leads to a flourishing of the mind. Consider what it would look and feel like to be driven not by pleasure but purpose, finding meaning and satisfaction in living a good life for its inherent worth. During my trips to India I was humbled to meet people of limited finances—rickshaw drivers, cooks, and tailors—who derive satisfaction from treating their customers well and performing their service with dignity, in contrast to the wealthy and often miserable CEOs I've encountered in my therapy practice who have confused wealth with happiness. We must go beyond capitalism, scientism, and nihilism if we want to reconnect with spirit and pursue meditation the way it was intended—for the development and liberation of consciousness.

Professor Robert Thurman

In the eighth century, Kamalashila's Stages of Meditation detailed the prerequisites that allowed newly interested Tibetan Buddhists to develop their minds with the technology of meditation.

Kamalashila's legacy endures in the twentieth century with a contemporary scholar-practitioner who facilitated the early transmission of Buddhism to America.

In 1999, Joe encouraged me to study with *his* mentor, Professor Robert Thurman, the first American ordained as a monk in the Tibetan tradition, holder of the first endowed chair of Indo-Tibetan studies at Columbia University, and lifelong friend of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Affectionately known as Bob, or more impressively as the Thurmanator, he became the second-most influential mentor on my Lam Rim journey. His unbridled passion, dynamic teaching style, and use of intricate public discourse, along with his many books, including *Essential Tibetan Buddhism*, drew me deeper into the Tibetan tradition that had been ignited by Joe's interest and passion and informed by his clinical synthesis and adaptation.

I volunteered to fold chairs and collect coats at Tibet House—the US Cultural Center of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, founded in 1987 by Bob Thurman, among others—in exchange for access to Thurman's teachings, which were a fusion of enlightened wrath and creative articulation. I savored his words from the shadows of the last row of the room for two decades as my confidence grew and I became a faculty member at Tibet House. I now take the stage to teach with the teachers I admired from afar, thus fulfilling the true intent of the Lam Rim and the hero's journey—to become a mentor oneself and to bestow on others the life-affirming message and skills that Joe Loizzo, Bob Thurman, and, through him, His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the entire Gelugpa lineage of the Dalai Lamas imparted to me.

It was Bob Thurman's *The Jewel Tree of Tibet*, published in 2005, that blew my mind and stole my heart. In it, he writes:

> And it was not just the text and the teachings that affected me so deeply. It was the special context in which Tibetans meditate and use their teachings. I learned to look up with my inner eye, the third eye of imagination, which lies in the middle of our foreheads and opens a channel of vision into a subtle realm of reality. In this inner sky revealed by my third eye, I discovered mystical beings, buddhas, bodhisattvas . . . historical lama mentors, angels, deities mild and fierce, and all the saints and teachers and philosophers from all the world's spiritual traditions. I beheld the shining tree of jewels, decked with living jewel beings . . .
>
> The Jewel Tree opens its loving embrace to everyone and promotes happiness—which is our natural state and birthright.[1]

While Godwin reopened my heart and Joe Loizzo paved my career path as a therapist, Bob Thurman revealed the Jewel Tree—the structured, virtual-reality simulator in which Tibetans visualize—and illuminated the vast Lam Rim treasury for me, as did Atisha's The Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment for generations of scholars and practitioners in Tibet. Thurman insisted on maintaining the vibrancy and integrity of the Tibetan tradition, and he employed a new vernacular and teaching style to make these teachings accessible. While most Western teachers were content to extract and reduce meditation techniques from their original culture and philosophy, Thurman unapologetically and creatively drew students into the whole Tibetan paradigm. It is in this spirit of respect for the tradition that I'd like to share a classical Tibetan way of approaching visualization, nuanced by Thurman's creative flair and Loizzo's scientific rigor.

Six Preliminaries: A Comprehensive Visualization Practice

Once the Six Conditions have been established, both Kamalashila and Tsongkhapa present the Six Preliminaries—the context and basic structure for a comprehensive visualization practice. This

preparatory system of initiation, ritual, and creative imagery is used by great teachers, such as the Dalai Lama, but it is so simple that any of us can employ it. No matter where you are on your path or what tradition—such as loving-kindness, centering prayer, shamanism, or yoga—you embrace, there's a natural way to build your daily practice within this scaffolding.

When I say "preliminaries," I mean the activities involved in preparing the mind for the three milestone realizations—evolutionary self-care, radical altruism, and quantum view—along the Lam Rim Road Map.[2] The Six Preliminaries compose a framework to support our psychological and spiritual development and parallel the first six steps on the road map. Everything we need is neatly packed into this complete system:

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.
6. Offer the mandala and final prayers.

In this chapter, we'll focus on the first three preliminaries.

ROAD MAP 1 **Create a Sacred Space**

The first of the Six Preliminaries begins with creating a safe and sacred space by choosing, cleaning, and sanctifying a place for practice. Initially, this is a physical process—*clean up your mess*—but becomes a mental one, as in *clear your mind*. The starting point is finding a meditation place, and doing so is an act of reprioritization and a measure of your commitment to a spiritual life. That's what true transformation demands. If you are an athlete, part of your basement might be reserved for gym equipment, or if you are a musician, you might have a soundproofed room to rehearse in, so it follows that if you're interested in becoming a contemplative, you set aside an area in your home and make it meaningful and appealing for your spiritual practice. What that looks like depends on how you'd like to feel and express the virtue of contemplation and transformation.

Create and clear your meditation area and sanctify it in a way that feels authentic and meaningful to you. Outer clutter reflects inner clutter, so dignify this space as an extension of your mind: a laboratory where some of the most important discoveries of your life can occur. Thoughtfulness begins with our environment. There is an energetic circuitry between the external and internal, mind and motivation, that Asian cultures (particularly the Sino-Tibetans) appreciated, and which takes its full expression in Feng Shui.[3] When you get up in the morning and tidy the space, think of it as meditation in motion, not a chore. We bring meaning to life's activities, not the other way around.

Think about "cleaning up" your time as well. Do this by allotting a period for meditation each day, setting your intention to practice instead of doing things haphazardly. Consistency builds

muscle memory, a biological set point like a regular sleep cycle.

ROAD MAP 2 **Set Up an Altar and Make Offerings**

Most of us come from secularized backgrounds from which spiritual forms, practices, and rituals have been scrubbed away, and we tend to have an aversion toward things like altars. However, most members of the world's religious population keep a personal altar or shrine in their home, where they connect with and perform rituals to ancestors, saints, and the Divine, even amid modern, urban lives. In Western secular culture, altars have morphed into man caves, home theaters, or packed closets where we worship the gods of fame, beauty, and success. Consider how much time, energy, and prioritization we give these. Sound judgmental? Would it be judgmental for me to say a crisp, fresh kale salad is healthier than a bucket of fried chicken, or a run in the park more vitalizing than a television binge? We've been trained to abandon discernment—some things *are* better for us than others. It's *not* all good.

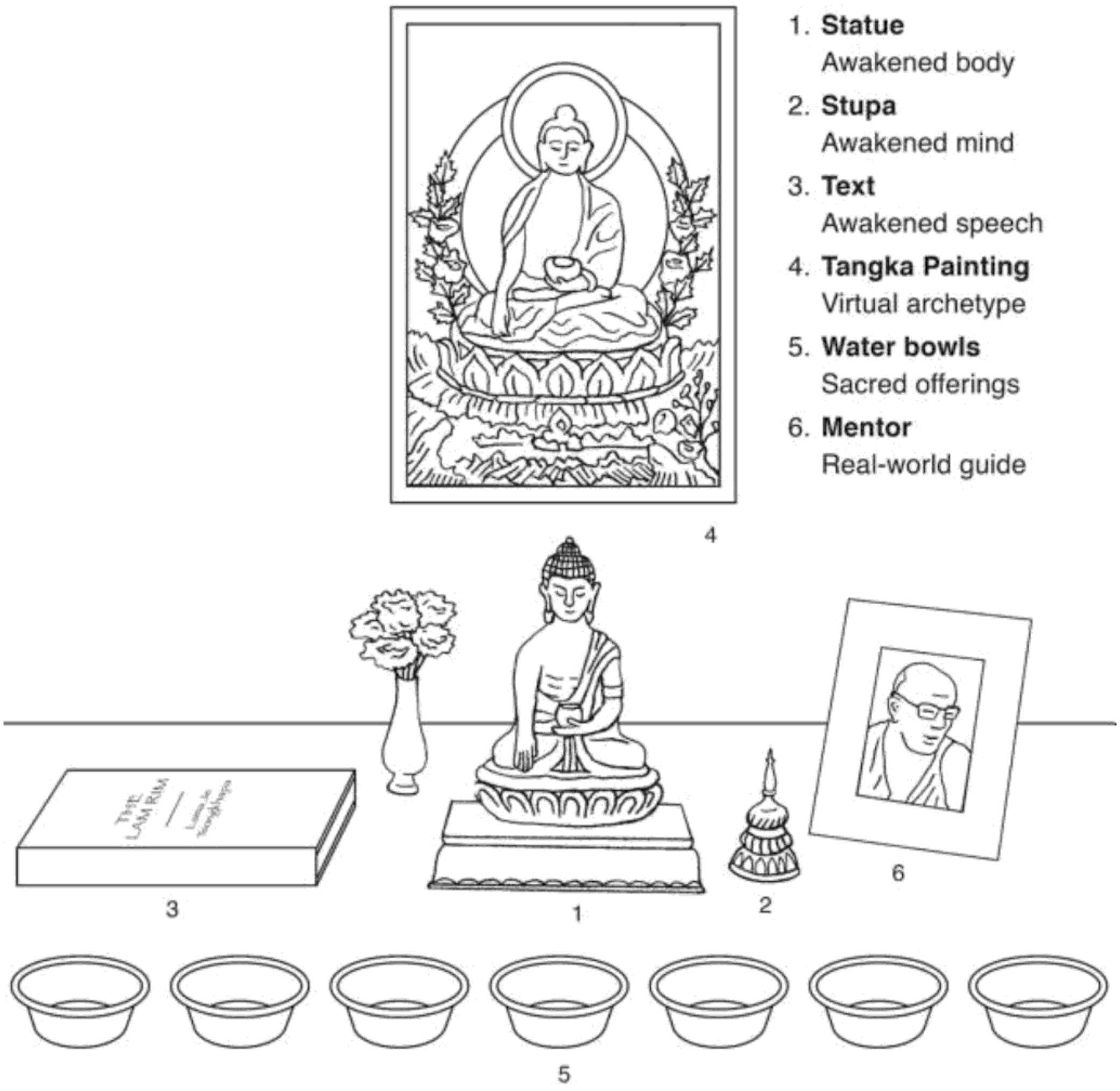
If you can see an altar as psychological or emotional equipment—a bench press for the mind, augmentation for the heart—it might change your opinion. One of my teachers once said, "Clean your house as if the Dalai Lama was coming to visit for tea." *Now* imagine sitting down at your altar with the Dalai Lama. It makes for an incredibly different experience if you picture an inspiring person right there with you. This may *change your mind*, not because of anything magical or special that is *out there*, but because the visualization shifts the quality of your experience. *This altar is not for anybody else.* Whose mind improves if you look at your altar and see a real Buddha instead of a bronze statue of a Buddha? *Yours.*

When Tibetan Buddhists set up altars, they put many objects on them, but three are central:

- Buddha statue (symbolizing awakened body)
- scripture or other text (symbolizing awakened speech)
- stupa or other shrine (symbolizing awakened mind)

So when you sit facing an altar, you become familiar with transforming your own body, speech, and mind.

The body or form of a Buddha (*rupakaya*), particularly the aspects of compassion and engagement, is represented by a statue placed in the middle of the altar. Your Buddha might be a Tibetan *thangka* painting or a simple stone. It might be a photograph of the Dalai Lama or Pope Francis, an image of Pema Chödrön or Martin Luther King Jr. No matter who or what it is, imagine it's the embodiment of a real, living Buddha inviting you to practice, inspiring you to evolve.



Set up an altar and make offerings.

The expression, or awakened speech, and the teachings are represented by a sacred text, placed to the left of the Buddha when you're facing the altar, and by spoken mantras and chants that evoke the deity during one's liturgy (*sadhana*). A physical representation of a text can be anything that involves dharma—a correct understanding of reality expressed through words, which is the speech of the Buddha, or one who has awoken. It could be a book, such as Tsongkhapa's Great Treatise, Thurman's *The Jewel Tree of Tibet*, Zen Master Dogen's *Shobogenzo*, the Bhagavad Gita, the Bible, the Qur'an, Rumi poems, or books by Stephen Hawking or Mary Oliver—anything that directs your mind toward awakening. It doesn't have to be Buddhist. As Thurman says, we're not here to make Buddhists; we're here to guide society toward enlightenment by awakening its people . . . people who have the potential to evolve using whatever tradition they desire.

The *dharmakaya*, or mind of awakening, the actual realization of emptiness-interdependence, is represented by a miniature stupa, shrine, or small pagoda placed on the right side of the Buddha statue. A stupa or shrine is a repository for relics of great teachers, including the Buddha, to be housed, memorialized, and venerated. The stupa, a dome in India, Tibet, and Burma, evolved into a pagoda with a series of ascending levels representing consciousness for Buddhists further east in China, Korea, and Japan. You can select any object—a memento from a deceased parent, or an urn or box—and imbue it with meaning, allowing it to become a sacred portal to an ancestor, legacy, or

lineage. Every time you see the shrine or container, associate it and its contents with awakening.

Once you've arranged the altar, the ritual of offering acts as a psychological antidote to our habits of fear-based attachment and clinging rooted in scarcity thinking. Making offerings is not limited to a single culture, and you might find that you are making them for reasons other than the ones described. One offers what and how one can. The importance is in the attitude, the sincerity with which we make the offering. The greater our intentions, the greater they resonate with the spirit of generosity.

WATER BOWL OFFERINGS

Once you understand the karmic significance of rituals, Buddhist or otherwise, they become a powerful psychological exercise sparking insights by circumventing the slower, verbal left brain, and by accessing, through symbols and gestures, the right brain's highway to the body, emotions, and intuition. If you understand karma (which for now we'll define as psychological causality) and meditation (as mental cultivation) the way I present them in this book, then you'll come to see how any ritual can be a complete psychological workout unto itself.

One of my favorite practices is the water bowl offering, based on a traditional Tibetan Buddhist ritual. While the practice involves offering water, it includes visualization and affirmation aspects as well, as we imagine that the water is transformed into delightful substances and symbolic gifts that we bless with purifying mantras. One thing about Tibetan Buddhism is that most ritual activities are ornate, multidimensional, and multisensory. That's important because we are completely involved and totally immersed in a process, not just at a cognitive or emotional level but in a sensory, behavioral, energetic, and verbal dimension as well. We're trying to rewire the totality of our being through ritual (behavior), mantra (speech), and active imagination (perception). This is a distinctive characteristic and advantage of the Tibetan approach, in contrast to simple mindfulness practice. It's the difference between cross-training—working many skills simultaneously—versus using only one piece of gym equipment to develop an isolated muscle. You can improvise and personalize this practice, but here is a basic form done in the Tibetan manner:

- Because one never puts an empty bowl on an altar, hold one of seven clean bowls, fill it with water, and place it on your altar in front of the Buddha. Repeat with each bowl, arranged in a line, separated one from the other by the length of a grain of rice.

- Pour water from the first to the second, from the second to the third, and so on. As you do, mentally transform the liquid into the sacred substances listed below by chanting the mantra Om Ah Hum. These three sacred syllables hold a resonance that purifies the body, speech, and mind.
  1 Water to refresh
  2 Water to bathe
  3 Flowers to delight
  4 Incense to perfume
  5 Light to illuminate
  6 Scented oil to ease
  7 Food to nourish

- An eighth gift of music is represented by the sacred sound of your prayers, mantra, and chanting, or you can add a candle to stand for light.

The idea behind this practice is based on the science of karmic causality, not dogma or rote. The power of creative imagination to influence our neurobiology is well documented,[4] and so an ordinary act of giving water to a statue can be transformed into an extraordinary act of offering sacred substances to the actual Buddha and mentors themselves, as if they are there with us. The brain registers the potency whether the acts are real or imagined. The ritual then becomes a sacred exchange of empathic reciprocity and a skill training of openheartedness that optimally change your mind and affect future perception, leading you to behold abundance.

THREE PROSTRATIONS

We've purified and made offerings of sacred substances to evoke and delight the mentors; now we purify and offer ourselves. We do this by making three prostrations, or bows, at the altar.

On a physical level, bowing is an act of trust, because our gaze is turned down and our neck is exposed. Consider how much resistance an opportunity to bow stirs in you on a personal, transgenerational, and cultural level . . . and now, think of it like a yoga asana. The symbolic counterpart to bowing is the mental act of humility, reverence, and healthy reliance. By prostrating, we are surrendering egocentrism and unhealthy defensiveness. We are supplicating the Buddha, dharma, sangha (mentor, teaching, and community), as if saying, "The way I've lived my life, the way it is right now, has become unmanageable. I will humble myself . . . *surrender my delusion-driven will*, and symbolically place myself in the care of a greater force to have the opportunity to be free and happy."

Some form of bowing is important in most spiritual traditions. In Islam, the devout bow to Mecca five times a day. Catholics genuflect. The first steps of the 12-step program for recovery involve admitting one is powerless over addiction and turning will over to a higher power. That "greater force" to which we supplicate in Buddhism is none other than our innate wisdom of discernment that can perceive reality and choose to live well. Here is the way Tibetans make prostrations:

1. Place your thumbs together and cup your fingers in a prayer gesture around them so that your hands look like a candle flame within a lantern.

2. Touch four points on your body: crown, third eye at forehead, mouth, and heart.

3. Lower onto both knees and either touch your forehead to the ground from a kneeling position or do a full-length prostration, extending your entire body with five points of contact (two knees, chest, chin, and forehead) to the ground.

4. Extending both hands forward, raise your fingertips while visualizing yourself touching the feet (a gesture of respect) of the Buddha or your mentor, who is watching over you.

5. Bringing hands back together, raise the forearms in prayer gesture.

Repeat this process three times. As you do, pair the physical sequence with a verbal affirmation and visual cue to make the whole process multidimensional and integrated.

1. As you touch the top of your crown, chant silently, *I take refuge in my mentors*. Imagine your entire being is purified of karmic imprints that create suffering.

2 As you touch your forehead, say, "I take refuge in the Buddha." Imagine your body purified.

3 As you touch your mouth, say, "I take refuge in the dharma." Imagine your speech purified.

4 As you touch your heart, say, "I take refuge in the sangha." Imagine your mind purified.

Westerners can be weird about this stuff. I know I was. We are either critical and dismissive of cultural forms or blindly zealous. It helped me to remember I was bowing to "the Buddha within"—my own potential to transform and awaken, to loosen my fixation on a sense of self filled with pride, envy, and the rest that was making me unhappy. We have built up a lot of defense mechanisms because of trauma, and part of that defense is staying independent, disconnected, and seemingly in control. While these are understandable temporary reactions to pain and broken trust, over a lifetime these maladaptive strategies become hindrances to maturation, crutches that keep us hobbling on the path. Prostration practice is a good way to kick up painful memories and volatile emotions such as anger, fear, and shame related to power dynamics and vulnerability. It's when shit gets stirred that we have a chance to work through it; otherwise trauma stays dormant and can emerge when we least expect it, often with destabilizing outcomes.

If you go to some place in India where Tibetans in exile are still allowed to practice freely, such as Dharamsala or Ladakh, what do you think yogis and pious householders are doing? Three prostrations in front of the Buddha? No. *A hundred thousand prostrations!* And that's not an easy thing to do. It's a physical and emotional challenge. It's a full workout. It's *serious*. You get cuts, blisters, bruises, and spasms. It's hard to sleep, and it's hard to wake up. You may feel like you're eighty years old. That's the level of commitment it takes to erode our neuroses, to work through our bullshit, our pain, our entitlement, and the layer of defensiveness that Wilhelm Reich famously called "character armor." It's a way of letting go of who we think we are, clearing the field for planting what we can become on the Lam Rim journey. The process of maturity takes grace and grit. Especially grit. *No mud, no lotus.* Anyone who tells you otherwise may have an alternate agenda. Nothing truly spiritual is as pretty and manicured as the cover of *Yoga Journal* depicts.

The Tibetans call this a *purification*. I know that's another loaded word, but psychologically what we're doing is softening the rigidity of self-identification. Like alchemists heating an alloy so it can be transformed into gold, a hundred thousand repetitions kicks up the impurities and afflictions, stokes the fire to searing temperatures sufficient to melt defenses and penetrate and access the vulnerability of our tenuous sense of self, so we can evolve. Practices of purification abound in Tibetan Buddhism, and prostrating three times is a good place to start. "A little every day" characterizes the gradual approach.

ROAD MAP 3 **Prepare Your Body and Mind**

After you've created and cleaned a sacred environment, made offerings, and done prostrations, it's time to sit on your meditation seat. The iconic meditation pose is not mystical, but practical; an aligned and stable posture allows the body to become still so the mind can reach clarity, gathering virtues and insights. Think about a microscope looking at subatomic layers of reality, or a telescope focused on distant galaxies—the discovery of the ultimate beyond ordinary, subjective perceptions requires stability, focus, and vividness. That's what we're trying to replicate here in the laboratory

of observing subjective experience.

SEVEN-POINT POSTURE

I like Tibetan teacher Mingyur Rinpoche's advice to keep one's back upright and body relaxed. With a general audience, he doesn't say any more than that about posture. The full lotus position, which is typical of a meditating Buddha, is ideal but not necessary. If you can't do it, that's okay, because comfort is important, especially for beginners. The Buddhist scriptures refer to four meditation positions: walking, standing, sitting, and lying down. The thing they all share is a straight spine, so if you have an injury or limitation, bear it in mind and do the best you can. Quality is the main thing to strive for; your posture should be balanced, alert, and fluid—not rigid or lax—and the quality of your mind should follow suit.

Traditionally, there are seven points to a steady meditation seat:

1. Legs crossed in full or half lotus
2. Hands in an intentional gesture, or mudra (for example, right hand underneath the left, with palms facing upward, or open palms facing down and resting on each knee)
3. Spine held like a stack of coins, upright but not rigid
4. Shoulders open evenly, floating and not stiff (be mindful of hunching or slouching)
5. Head level, with chin tilted down slightly to elongate spine
6. Mouth closed, with tongue lightly touching the front roof of the palate
7. Eyes half open, gently gazing about a foot in front of you, or closed, depending on your degree of restlessness

THREE LEVELS OF ASPIRATION

Just as Lam Rim can be divided into three paths—renunciation, compassion, and wisdom—it can also be parsed according to the three levels of practitioners' aspirations. A healthy and realistic self-assessment of aspiration without bias or criticism will lead to a pursuit that is authentic and will help you find your starting point on the Lam Rim map. What's more, inspirations change—we may start with one, and as we achieve realizations, come to adopt a more generous or greater aspiration as our capacity grows.

Aspirations correspond to our capacity for focus, our determination, our ability to tolerate difficulties, our level of compassion for others and ourselves, and how clear our view is. We can't fake aspiration. If we do, we may overlook our true stage on the Lam Rim and risk injury in the same way that overzealous or insecure martial artists rush toward a black belt before mastering basic skills and undergoing building-block experiences that have transformative potential. These are the three aspirations:

1. Humble aspiration for *well-being* in this life and beyond
2. Middling aspiration for complete *freedom* from self-imposed suffering

3 Great aspiration to awaken for the benefit of others, or *altruism*

Humble Aspiration

Let's start by contrasting the humble or modest aspiration for well-being within the predominant aspiration of our culture. What motivates most of us in the West? We strive for pleasure *now*. Immediate gratification, at any cost. That's why we are overweight, overstimulated, addicted, over-medicated, and self-destructive. Consumerism is all about having our cake and eating it, too, without considering the consequences. That's why I'm troubled by how self-help marketers co-opt and interpret spiritual teacher Ram Dass's seminal mantra "be here now"—playing into our culture's hedonic compulsion and making it all about "me." Who cares about the oceans, forests, and the people we leave behind? Sensory gratification, driven by what Freud called the pleasure principle, is the most pervasive, unconscious aspiration in our culture. The tragedy is that it has no endgame, no long-term purpose. You might wake up and go to work because it pays the bills, your morning muffin and soy latte giving you comfort on the way, and your evening yoga class making you unstressed or exhilarated so that you can go home tired, fall asleep, and do it all again. Not a single moment is spent asking what's it all for. Or maybe you have asked but didn't like or can't find the answer. Most of us are struggling to get by, so having a vision of something bigger might seem a luxury, but is it? An absence of aspiration is one reason why we see such apathy among those impacted by a capitalistic and consumerist agenda predicated on nihilism, leaving them disenfranchised with no intrinsic purpose to life, no encouragement to develop soul or mind, and no evolutionary gains to move toward.

In contrast, the Lam Rim offers several legitimate motivations for spiritual practice, which is to strive for some measure of inner well-being and contentment, to access and activate innate capacities for wisdom and compassion, and to see this as the arc of one's life ambition, so that daily activities—even mundane ones from lattes to email to yoga class—become part of a singular and meaningful pursuit. Ordinary life is not a distraction or dead end but a means to a higher purpose: the soul's development.

Two things differ between mundane and spiritual motivations: the shift from a hedonic orientation with an insistence on immediate gratification of the physical senses versus a eudaemonic orientation with an enduring patience for the gradual development of the soul. There is a qualitative difference to pursuing something you know will reap fruit years from now, versus striving for the immediate. Freud knew this, and he noted that it was a sign of maturity to be able to delay gratification rather than be a slave to impulses. From a Lam Rim perspective, blindly pursuing hedonic goals in the moment is a waste of inner resources such as energy and concentration, because those pursuits are short-lived. But if we harness energy and channel it toward creating something more sustainable, then our activities are more valuable.

Abating poverty, racism, climate change, and corruption requires a specific aspiration and maturity that directs energy toward a long-term solution of sustainable transformation and surpasses the temporary experience of gratification. That's a good description for how the humble aspiration works: we set our sights on a more peaceful and abundant future by curtailing impulses and karmically cultivating internal reward, both of which make us less dependent on the external environment. In the Tibetan tradition, this aspiration is called "eliminating vice and accumulating virtue" with the intention of redirecting energy toward a higher future purpose. It's still self-interested, but it's not hedonic. With such an aspiration, we recognize how to use principles of causality systematically (rather than haphazardly) to achieve the experiences we want, and we do so with an endgame in mind. However, this aspiration does not eradicate the root causes of the compulsive life cycle. (This will make more sense once we explore how karma works, which will

happen in the next chapters. For now, practice delaying your gratification!)

Middling Aspiration

The second aspiration is for freedom. Here we expand the parameters from creating the causes and conditions for good fortune in the future to the complete elimination of suffering. Whereas the former keeps us bound within the unconscious cycles of compulsive life, trying to improve the quality of our experience and yet intermittently having to endure the residual effects of past negative actions, the latter aims to dismantle the trauma cycle so we no longer produce self-imposed suffering.

Whereas the humble aspiration asks us to appreciate karmic and ethical principles that create our experience of feast or famine, the second aspiration requires us to take refuge in the teachings, actualize renunciation, and achieve the wisdom of selflessness. It's important to know that the goal of being free is innately possible for us all. It is our birthright, and yet to be realistic, it is an exalted and rare accomplishment, requiring a full commitment of one's precious human resources. To commit one's entire life energy toward the pursuit of awakening might be an unreasonable or overly high bar for some, particularly in a culture where awakening isn't even part of our vernacular or paradigm, so start where you are, working with those perceived limitations, fears, and doubts rather than forcing it or abandoning the path altogether.

Great Aspiration

The third and final level of Lam Rim aspiration is the freedom to awaken for the benefit of others. In addition to karma, ethics, refuge, renunciation, and wisdom of selflessness, the aspirant seeking this needs the wisdom of interdependence and altruistic motivation, or the heart of universal compassion called Bodhicitta. This level of aspiration may seem lofty, because the scope of trying to awaken for all living beings is so expansive and grandiose, but from the Buddhist perspective, we all have the potential, just as we have the capacity as mammals to naturally care for our young, regardless of whether we choose to exercise it or not. In the optimistic cosmology of Tibetan Buddhism, all beings will evolve to see that there is no greater use of time and energy than to strive to awaken in order to help all living beings achieve freedom and sustainable happiness. This becomes the implicit thrust of the latter half of the Lam Rim progression of milestones. We'll all get there eventually, but it's best to show respect and "be here now" with humility and honesty. Do we feel ready to delay sensory gratification and work toward cultivating inner well-being in the future? Do we have an even more ambitious motivation to strive exclusively for complete freedom? Or do we have the most expansive ambition to awaken for all life?

Taking Refuge: Mastering Evolution

Before we begin meditating, it's important to set our intentions—for Lam Rim practice specifically, but it's a useful habit for any aspect of our life. All successful action off the cushion is predicated by clear intention. Just as one wouldn't run a marathon without preparation, I'd discourage you from coming to your meditation seat and starting haphazardly. Approach your practice in the way you would a session with a psychotherapist or doctor when you're urgently seeking relief: as an opportunity to discover and embody something that will set you free.

A prayer or chant is a way of creating an imprint in your mind to one day perceive and experience something favorable. It's a way of actively setting aspiration through a process of cultivation and familiarization. What you *think,* you *become*. If I take refuge in my unworthiness, I engender unworthiness, I stew on unworthiness, and I turn my attention toward and fill my lifestyle with actions that reinforce my unworthiness. However, if I take refuge in my basic

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