

EXPERIENCE—KAREN DENNIS, LAS VEGAS 'A 21ST CENTURY WOMAN'

In the following interview, Karen Dennis, USA track and field head coach for the 2000 Olympics and SGI-USA member, spoke with World Tribune Staff Writer Stephanie Celano about her life as a coach, her role as a mentor, the Sydney challenge and victory and the importance of Buddhism in her life.

World Tribune: What attracted you to practicing Nichiren Dai-shonin's Buddhism?

Karen Dennis: I began my Buddhist practice in 1974. My older brother, Tim, introduced me. He told me he had the key to happiness and to make a list of things I wanted to change in my life. I had a statistics class that I had only attended once that I needed to pass. I thought, "If I could pass this class, I'll chant." I tested it. I passed, and 26 years later, I'm still practicing.

At the time, I was poor, a single parent and trying to finish my undergraduate degree in agricultural economics.

WT: When did you get involved in athletics?

Dennis: I had previously been an athlete when I was a teenager in Detroit. I belonged to a grassroots track club called the Detroit Track Club. The first time I ran, I beat the state champion.

In 1964 and 1968, I tried out for the Olympics in track and didn't make it. After two disappointments, I just dropped out of track, out of school—I just didn't do anything productive.

For a few years, I actually got on the wrong track by hanging out with the wrong people, using drugs and eventually getting pregnant. With an infant and very few skills, I knew I had to clean up my life to provide for my daughter, Ebony, who was depending on me. I was 24, and fortunately my former track coach, Jim Bibbs, encouraged and helped me to attend Michigan State University and resume my athletic career.

After a six-year layoff, I seriously doubted ever running again.

I was overwhelmed with a demanding schedule of study, work, track practice and caring for a toddler. I started chanting for energy to accomplish my daily goals. That was the beginning.

I also began learning gongyo (the recitation of morning and evening prayers), which was difficult, but the Lansing, Mich., members visited me every day to teach me. They were dedicated, and I probably would not be practicing Buddhism today if they hadn't done that. Once I learned gongyo, that's when I felt my life beginning to change. I became more organized, I required less sleep, and I had more energy. As the Buddhists kept coming to my house, the people who tried to influence me to take drugs stopped coming around.

With new priorities, my athletic training progressed despite a terrible injury-plagued first year. My coach, however, was very patient and encouraged me to believe in myself—because he did. He helped me to keep up my morale as I rehabilitated from various injuries.

In 1975, I was competing again and qualified for the national collegiate championships

in the 200-meter dash. A week prior to the meet, I chanted three hours a day to do well. I ended up winning the 200-meter title. Everyone wanted to know “where did she come from?”

WT: That’s incredible. How did you begin your coaching career with an agricultural economics degree?

Dennis: After winning the national championship and completing my undergraduate degree, the women’s athletic director at MSU asked me to assist her in the program while pursuing my master’s degree in sports administration. My tuition was completely paid for by doing a graduate assistantship.

That’s how I started coaching. My success is because of my Buddhist practice, because I chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. I got really focused. There’s no telling where I’d be without it. I know I would not have been able to accomplish my goals because I had lost sight of them.

During my assistantship, I was responsible for the entire track and field program. I did the recruiting, developed training programs for the sprinters and hurdlers, organized the relays and kept the team focused on goals. At times I resented it. I also thought I might have a nervous breakdown. It was a lot of work—particularly when I was pursuing a graduate degree and raising a young child at the same time.

When I finished my master’s in ’77, I continued to work at MSU. In retrospect, all the hard work I did prepared me for the position of head coach, which I eventually was offered in 1979. It was quite an opportunity to become the head coach for a Division I team at a major university. I stayed at Michigan State from 1979–91. It was hard to leave.

In ’91, I took a risk and accepted the position as head coach at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. It was the right time.

WT: How has your personal experience helped the women you coach?

Dennis: The fact that I’ve overcome negativity in my own life has inspired them when they are faced with problems or when life doesn’t seem to go the way they’ve planned it. I have coached kids who were molested by their parents, kids whose parents are drug addicts and kids who were raised by parents who were teenagers themselves. They’ve had a myriad problems.

Because my life wasn’t perfect—although it started out pretty perfect because I had great parents and a wonderful family—but because of the problems I experienced later in my life, I could relate to their problems. I was sensitive and had more empathy than what they may have gotten from any other coach. I think I may have helped many of them recover from the problems they were challenged with and to regain their confidence to accomplish their goals. Buddhism has taught me that you can’t let obstacles get in the way of achieving or striving for success.

My challenges in school, as well as being a single parent, are certainly experiences that I can relate to my young athletes. I also talk to them about how to survive when confronted with poverty and about how to challenge themselves now while they are young.

WT: How did you become the USA track and field head coach for the 2000 Olympics?

Dennis: After my success as the assistant coach of the 1995 World Championships squad in Göteborg, Sweden, the 1996 Olympics coach nominated me for the 2000 Olympics. I had heard my name going around but I honestly never expected it to happen.

WT: Tell me about Sydney. What was your greatest challenge?

Dennis: Sydney was the most challenging experience of my entire life—words can't describe it fully.

In the two and a half years that that we prepared for Sydney, the one thing that I had communicated regularly to my athletes was to be flexible, to expect change, to expect the unexpected. I knew things were going to be hard, but I didn't know they would be as hard as they were. What made it so hard was that so many things did change—as I expected. I had to respond to these changes quickly, and the decisions I made had to be right. That was what created so much pressure.

For example, with our 4x100-meter relay, I carefully planned how we were going to win the gold medal. We planned to go to Europe during the summer to train and run in some international competitions, allowing our athletes to stay sharp. That way I could monitor their progress and work on the baton pass in a competitive situation. It's difficult to have accurate baton exchanges in a practice setting because the level of intensity of running is not the same as when competing.

When you actually get to the Olympics, you don't have time to work on these details. It was a perfect plan and it worked. What I didn't plan for was two key runners getting hurt. Every day something happened that was not good.

Each day before dawn, I got up to chant for at least an hour. It was my way of keeping some kind of order through this chaotic situation.

At the same time, I had the world press after me every single minute asking about our status—if there were any injuries, if there were any changes. Of course, I didn't want the world to know that we were really a mess. I managed to respond to them without disclosing how dire the situation was for us on a day-to-day basis.

Eventually, I started chanting two hours every morning because I needed to improve the situation—I needed my injured athletes to get better. What was I going to do without two runners on a relay team? I chanted for the wisdom to make the right decisions.

People were really flipping out from all the pressure. At one point, I thought about Nichiren Daishonin when he was exiled on Sado Island. At that time he said he was the happiest man in Japan. I figured, if the Daishonin could withstand the cold, lack of food, isolation and extreme deprivation, then who was I to complain? I was at the greatest sporting event of all, the Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia, with the greatest athletes in the world, surely I could prevail.

I realized this was my crucial moment, and that “the sword of the Lotus Sutra is useless in the hands of a coward.” Excited about our challenge, I greeted my staff each day proclaiming “It's another beautiful day in paradise.” That kept me fearless and up beat so I could encourage them.

To make a long story short, we ended up using people in that 4x100 meter relay who had no Olympic experience. Everything that could go wrong did. I wanted a gold medal, but we got the bronze—even that was a tremendous benefit.

The 4x400-meter relay was about an hour and 15 minutes later. Marion Jones, our premier sprinter, was very disappointed after the first relay and so was I. But another

coach saw how distraught I was and said, “Karen you better get yourself together.” That’s when I snapped back.

Before the 4x400-meter relay, the media called me daily asking where I was going to put Marion. *Sports Illustrated* picked the Russians to win the gold, and maybe the United States would take home the bronze medal. I never told the media our strategy because I didn’t want the world to know. Otherwise, other teams would organize their relay squad to try and beat us. I ended up running Marion on the third leg, knowing she would run against slower legs on the other relay teams. We wanted to open up a large enough lead where none of the fast anchor legs would catch ours.

Since we were disappointed about not winning the gold in the 4x100-meter relay, we talked about how we could win if everyone ran up to expectation. Our strategy worked out, and we won the gold medal. It was the last event of the Olympic competition so we ended on a high note and returned home very excited.

WT: I heard you had quite a homecoming celebration.

Dennis: I was completely exhausted when I returned home. Many people—SGI-USA members, my team at UNLV, and citizens of Las Vegas were there to greet me. They had roses and signs—it really lifted me back up. It was such a heartwarming welcome, and I felt so appreciative.

The next day, Mayor Oscar Goodman welcomed the Olympic participants from Nevada. He gave me a proclamation and designated Oct. 18, 2000, “Karen Dennis Day.” It was all pretty overwhelming.

The school also had a reception for the Olympians from UNLV. My kids gave me a card that said I was truly an example of a “21st century woman.” It was incredible.

On Nov. 27, we’re going to the White House, where the President will honor the entire U.S. Olympic delegation. I’ve never been to the White House and look forward to it.

WT: You mentioned that your kids called you a “21st century woman.” What do you think that represents?

Dennis: I think a woman of the 21st century is one that will have to master multiple responsibilities. She has to have confidence, self-esteem and be capable. She is a woman who will have a career and must still keep an eye on the youth, as well as the future.

WT: Do you have any final thoughts on mentoring?

Dennis: Just as SGI President Ikeda is my mentor in life and Jim Bibbs, Nel Jackson and Ed Temple were my mentors in coaching, I have to assume some responsibility in mentoring our youth. As I said before, I’ve not had a perfect life, and it made me want to give my kids a second chance. I had a good first chance, and I almost blew it. But I think my practice of Buddhism gave me a second chance at life. I know that’s what helped me through.

THE DENNIS DOSSIER

USA Track and Field Head Coach—2000 Olympics	Present
U.S. Women’s Assistant Coach—World Championships	1995
Mountain Pacific Sports Federation Coach of the Year	1993
District VIII Indoor Coach of the Year	1993
President—USA Track and Field Women’s Coaches Association	1990–92
U.S. Women’s Coach—Pan American Games	1991
District IV Indoor Coach of the Year (Michigan Sate)	1990
U.S. Women’s Assistant Coach—World University Games	1989
Track Coach—U.S. Olympic Sports Festival	1985–86