

EVOLUTION OF AN AWAKE ATHLETE

“Most of our troubles are due to passionate desire for and attachment to things that we misapprehend as enduring entities.”

His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama

It was cooler than a typical evening in McLeod Ganj, a suburb of Dharamsala, India. We gathered around a series of small tables under a clear sky at the outdoor cafe. This night was one of the few on which we could make out the high peaks of the Himalayas, the clouds moving about within the last light of the day. I was 37 years old and in a hillside village, 4,700 feet above sea level, double that in miles away from home, a half-day journey to the nearest industrialized city, and in the company of Tibetan refugees whose lives somehow seemed better than mine.

In moments like these, I feel the magic of life. It can be hard to comprehend how I get there, but then I remember an understanding I have always carried; every moment in life

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builds upon the next. So it's never one decision but a lifetime or lifetimes of them that gets us to where we are in a moment. And that night, I remember leaning back in my chair and feeling blessed for all I have lived and traversed because it led me to that cafe in India, an international journey that served as a great awakening in my life.

As I recall, there were six of us that night; four female students and two teachers, myself, and my friend Louise, a fellow massage therapist and instructor from the Boulder College of Massage Therapy (BCMT). We were several days into our trip, and the familiarity among our group was evident. Laughter was always on the menu with these joyous women even when they told inside jokes, clearly about us, in their native Tibetan tongue.

I fixated on the women as they shared their stories and spread their happiness generously. I kept tasting the air and feeling my feet in my shoes. I wanted to be in the moment like never before. I was learning about happiness in simplicity. It was novel to me. I suppose I didn't think it was possible to be so without *all the stuff*. I gained an understanding of their courageous escape to Dharamsala from their homeland of Tibet and more about the Tibetan uprising in March of 1959 that cost tens of thousands of Tibetan lives at the hands of the Chinese military. I learned that it had been a half-century since the Dalai Lama's escape from Tibet and the establishment of the Tibetan government-in-exile.

I asked the women what message I should bring home to the

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United States. How did they want us to support and raise awareness of Tibetan culture? They told me not to be bitter or talk poorly about the Chinese government or its people. They said China was confused and scared, which is why they did what they did. There was no need to punish them. They asked me to forgive if I was angry and be compassionate towards those who carried out such wrongdoings because karmic repayment was inevitable. There was neutrality in their tone and an absence of the vengeful satisfaction one could expect or justify. I felt a knowingness from within to heed the guidance; it carried a power I had been familiar with throughout my life.

It was in early 2009 when this opportunity to teach massage to Tibetan refugees in India came to my awareness. The trip was set for September that year, and there was no debate for me. I knew I was going from the moment I caught the first wind of the news. I had known for years that I would take big trips in my life, and these knowings always carried innate patience. I knew I would be ready to say “yes” when the time came. This was one of those times. I noticed that my ego also liked the idea very much. The praise of doing something so noble was too good to turn down. A part of me could not wait to climb onto a pedestal and share the news, which I did time and again. I was not awake to the ego back then as I am now, so yes, I used this trip to seek selfish praise, but that never overrode my grateful heart.

The trip was the brainchild of my friend Carol, one of my earliest mentors in living a creative life freely without succumbing to the engrained demands of society. She is a

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renegade to this day. At the time, she was the Director of Student Affairs at BCMT, where I worked part-time in the marketing department, a job I obtained after attending BCMT's extensive program to become a massage therapist. Being involved with the school professionally and working as a practitioner in the healing arts was beginning to shift my life radically. I was growing closer to something I always craved, a more meaningful existence.

In preparation for the trip, I learned more about the refugees we would be teaching and the town where we'd be staying. There was so much I did not know about Tibet and the strife its people endured. I did not realize that children walked through the Himalayas in handmade slippers under the guidance of warriors paid by their parents to get them to safety. I did not know that it was not only for their shot at a future but also for the Tibetan culture's preservation.

I grew up in Sandwich, Massachusetts, the oldest town on Cape Cod and the hometown of American author Thornton W. Burgess. A small village where "Free Tibet" bumper stickers on high-priced SUVs were the extent of my Tibetan education. I realized that I never had to consider my role in cultural preservation. I felt ignorant and a little angry, but simultaneously, I was open to absorbing the truth of what I was learning without judging the life I was born into.

I do not believe there is luck in this life, and I do not feel lucky because I grew up on Cape Cod. I am deeply grateful, of course, but I understand that the ebb and flow of my life are

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unique to my soul journey. Just as the students I was about to teach in India were living circumstances unique to their soul journeys. Through my spiritual studies, I now understand that all beings incarnate into the exact circumstances that allow for that soul's most extraordinary evolution. And although I know our essence to be the same, our worldly existence differs greatly. I wish I could agree that all are born equal, but I cannot. What I do agree with is the wisdom of the sages that proclaim every human being has the opportunity to wake up in this life.

For my story and alignment in this existence, the environment of my primary years did not lend much diversity to my upbringing, but I'm not sure that matters because I grew up in a home that taught me to love all. And isn't that the ultimate teaching? Actually, the complete teaching was I did not have to like everyone, but I must love all. My mom and dad are faithful and fiery, so it was love and forgiveness, but also, it was not putting up with crap from anyone.

It is true; I have lived an incredibly abundant life. I am deeply loved and was raised under guiding principles such as presence and gratitude. Sure, my family experienced financial stress, and I saw my dad get laid off more than once. But despite the challenges we faced, my parents always found a way. I saw my mom return to work full-time and become the breadwinner she remains today, close to her 90s (and crushing it)!

Our home was spacious and comfortable. We lived in a custom-built colonial in Jacob's Farm, a coveted neighborhood for its time. I was never without food, a roof, clothing, or

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accessories. Oh, if you could have seen my accessory collection. I lived in plenty, that is true, but I also believed in lack. I worried about money and battled with not feeling enough, yet there was no evidence of lack in my life. All I had ever known were Cape Cod problems, and I was on the verge of a remote stay in a developing nation. There was so much unknown ahead, and I was as scared as I was excited. Admittedly, I was craving it, I was restless and hungry for a courageous quest at this point in my life. There was a part of me that was choking on the comfort of my day in and day out. I wanted to experience life through new eyes. A pulsation in my heart rose through layers of conditioning, calling me to flame a spark of adventure. I needed this experience for my next level of growth, and I knew it. My thirst for knowledge called for quenching, and all of it was me already walking the spiritual path. It's the same path you are on, the one you have traversed for an eternity already. The one we can never fall off because, at our core, we are spiritual beings.

Anticipation built for months. The program was named *Massage For Peace*. We were scheduled to teach for seven days at Lha Charitable Trust in McCleod Ganj, and we set out to raise money to cover the cost of our travels and make a hefty cash donation for Lha's future programming. It was a brilliant and perfect plan because it was service work, something I wanted more of. Admittedly though, I still carried a selfish disposition which I discovered was rooted in competitiveness so natural to me I couldn't even see it. I just thought everyone wanted to win at everything and be the best all the time. But, after an uproar from my BCMT classmates when I stated I

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didn't have a competitive bone in my body, I realized that being competitive was a characteristic of my unique make-up. One that needed more proper channeling because sometimes it was hurtful to others. This was when I turned to triathlon; unbeknownst to me, the channel to Awake Athlete also opened.

My competitive tendencies did not extinguish during massage school, and in the case of triathlon, they were thriving. I continued to be driven by them, but it began to shift towards the betterment of others, not just the betterment of me. At my BCMT graduation, I was awarded the community service award, which was my first big taste of giving of myself to others. It was a new type of satisfaction, but the high number of service hours also came from wanting to win every award available and graduate at the top of my class. I have always felt a strong drive to excel, and I don't believe anything is wrong with that drive. It is who I am in this life, and maybe you can relate. We athletes share this and it is our most powerful tool for staying the course to mastery and living awake.

My experience at BCMT, first as a student and then as a team member, was a big waking-up time in my life and this trip to India was a natural extension of that growth. I was beginning to understand the layers and burdens I carried through the many heart-opening practices I engaged in throughout my massage therapy education. For example, non-violent communication and embodied knowledge of the subtle energy body, or as scientists call it, the biofield¹. A concept that woke

¹ The biofield is a field of energy that surrounds the body and extends out about eight feet from the gross physical body, it cannot be seen but it can be felt and measured.

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me up to a curiosity that perhaps I am more than just flesh. I began to worry less about the world's circumstances as I gained more wisdom about universal laws like the law of attraction and realized that perhaps the change I desired to see in the world began with me. I recognized that I didn't need to carry so much on my shoulders. As I leaned into healing modalities like acupuncture and energy work, I naturally moved toward the vulnerability necessary to let go of the pain I carried. With that, I noticed a growing desire for a simpler life overall.

It was the life I had heard about but doubted for so many years; you know, the one where happiness comes from the inside. A lesson our Tibetan students and the people of India showed me throughout our visit; minor amounts of material with persistent feelings of happiness. And that evening at the cafe, I shared with our students how impressed Louise and I were with their ability to pick up the massage techniques quickly. Day after day, we shook our heads in disbelief as the students demonstrated basic and advanced techniques with natural ability and quality of touch akin to years of experience. The women smiled in response to my observance as if they knew something we did not, which was apparent almost every time we spoke.

“Our minds are clear. They are not cluttered like American minds”, said Tashi. She spoke with an energy that was as light as a feather, causing me to reflect. I never thought of my mind as cluttered; I never examined my mind at all. Up until then, I allowed it to be what it was, and it was my master.

These women had plenty of reasons to have clutter in their

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minds. It wasn't as if they had not been exposed to intense life experiences. I mean, they left their families and walked a deathly route through the Himalayas. They lost members of their group along the way and were almost captured by Nepali police more than once. But somehow, they were not clouded with the trauma of their history. The reality of their past did not weigh them down. They had moved on and moved forward while not denying what had transpired. I saw something that evening I had not seen before. I didn't have words for it, but now I do. It was detachment accompanied by loving-kindness. It was the powerful neutrality that I have come to know as unconditional love.

In *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*², it is written that life is a passing show, and to cling to one instant creates tension in life. As Tibetan Buddhists, these women were raised within a construct of detachment. A conscious life of forgiveness and letting go, one that prepared them to say goodbye to their families and lose their homeland. A homeland most likely never believed to be theirs in the first place. I imagine they thought it was nobody's land and yet every being's land.

Over the remainder of our days together, I learned more about detachment and the freedom it lends to its practitioner. Some people hear detachment and think of apathy or complacency, but that is not the case. These students cared very much about what they were learning, but they weren't getting caught up

² The yoga sutras are a collection of 196 verses that guides one to attain self-realization through the study and practice of yoga, the science of the mind. Self-realization is the attainment of one's full potential; realization of the true Self. The version I study is translated by Sri Swami Satchinanda who is one of the most revered yoga masters of our time and also my guru's guru.

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in the complications of a cluttered mind or the tension experienced when we cling. They detached from the massage stroke, their thoughts about the stroke, the outcome of their efforts, and the traumas of their past. Detachment gave them presence, a clear and constant stream of precious moments linked within a lifetime. Moments devoid of time and free of the ego.

People live with immense stress levels in our modern society because they are attached to outcomes. We are worried about what will be and how the results will play out. If we work hard enough, this attachment path does work, but it is heavy and slow. It enhances doubt and worry, both of which clutter the hallways of our minds and dull our ability to perform at our best.

Through the quality of humility, I saw a way of life in India that was easeful and powerful. I had difficulty comprehending such meekness, not to mention compassion, but I was learning more every day. I honored their wishes and took note of their wisdom on happiness, but nothing shifted my life more than Tashi's take on the cluttered mind and the connection I made to allowing life to pass without tension. I walked away from that conversation with a strong desire to live within the flow of giving and receiving, letting go and moving forward. I wanted nothing to stand in my way of being better.

*The Bhagavad Gita*³ teaches that utter detachment and unwavering devotion are the qualities necessary to win the only war we must wage in this life. The war within. The one

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that Tashi and her fellow students were living every day with a level of grace I had not witnessed prior. They had every reason to choose a life of grievance, but instead, they lived for the moment because they knew, without being scared, that any day may be their last. They hold life with reverence and are awake without emotion to the karma, or cause and effect, that mapped the story of their life thus far.

To say that evening in Dharamsala launched my spiritual journey is false, but most assuredly, it catapulted me into the next level of spiritual living. I have felt a power deep inside me for as long as I can remember. It is below my heart and burns like the ball of fire in our sky. Like most of you, I grew up in a world that believed in separation, I was taught to work hard because that's the only way anything will be worthwhile. I considered no other way. I used my will to make things happen and often disregarded the feelings of others. I worked hard until burnout then I fought rest even when my body showed me glaring signs that it needed rest. I repeated cycles that compounded exhaustion in my body and mind.

My experience in India showed me a new way to direct my will. One that benefits the good of all and includes ease through letting go of the clutter in my mind. Surrendering to

3 *Bhagavad Gita* is a 700-verse Hindu scripture often referred to as the Gita. It is a poem known as the "Song of The Lord" composed by an ancient sage named Krishna Dvaipayana Vyasa. It presents the everyman's battle with the mind. The battle we all must wage in order to truly know who we are in this life. Through the experience of Arjuna, the greatest warrior of all time and his charioteer, Krishna, the student learns mind mastery through practices such as meditation, devotion and detachment. It takes place on a battlefield and is a part of the epic Mahabharata which details the struggle between two groups of family, the Kauravas and the Pandavas, during the Kurukshetra War.

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the truth of suffering in this world but not carrying it all on my shoulders. It was a concept that never really occurred to me before. I knew there were people dedicated to serving others, Mother Teresa, Sally Struthers, and Lady Diana. I grew up watching those figures advocate for others, but I just thought that was for them, not for me. I had zero notion that my energy, and yours too, affect the collective of all beings in every moment or that if hard work is the only way to achieve, I will not succeed by any other means than hard work.

When I returned home from India, I held a clear vision of my continued growth, and there was something about me that was less burdened. I self-regulated enough to realize that I still loved my Livingston entry bench from Pottery Barn, but I did go on to live from a higher perspective and expanded view.

Just one year later, my husband BJ and I left Boulder, Colorado, and moved back to Newport, Rhode Island, where we had met and fallen in love more than a decade before. Shortly after settling into our new home, I met my meditation teacher, or as I call him, Meditator Bob (MB). Then a few months later, my yoga mentor, Philip. These two men offered me tools to accelerate my path to enlightenment and humbled me greatly in recognition of my ego. I once heard Sailesh Rao of the organization Climate Healers describe enlightenment as the ability to experience the world as it is without judgment. Or, as MB tells me often, “be okay with whatever it is.”

So yeah, I’m not enlightened yet, but I have the tools and knowledge, and when you finish this book, so will you. This

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guide shines a light on the mechanisms of the ego and the clutter of the conditioned mind. It gives you the tools to be the master of those things and the knowledge to see that your highest potential in sport and life is at your disposal right now. It reveals the purpose of this world and the darkness that exists in contrast to its light.

The teachings I share in the coming pages are primarily from yoga practices and my interpretation of yogic wisdom. The base for all the inner work I discuss is the discipline of meditation. Regular practice of stillness is the foundation, not the add-on. For me, meditation became a non-negotiable pretty quickly once I committed to sit. Even though the first year was a slug-fest, I used my will to remain consistent. Maybe it will be natural for you, and you'll be like one of those athletes who qualify for a championship at their first triathlon. Either way, the awake athlete path yields irrevocable shifts that lead to free indulgence in the joys of athletic adventure. It is a path that awakens us to the incredible power and truth of our nature while utilizing our endurance endeavors as vehicles to master our minds and win the war within.

So please, know that you have stepped onto a pathway of excellence that very few will consider in their lifetime. Most people will not buy it; they will chalk it up to new age woo-woo or give it a shot only to fall victim to the lies of their untrained minds. Most will settle for mediocre instead of the miraculous because they believe the miraculous is something out of the ordinary instead of an experience readily available each day.

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As you read on, keep the following rule in the forefront of your experience, take what resonates and leave the rest. Use what you do not agree with to define what you do agree with and desire. And above all else, live the life you desire and be very stubborn about it. The laws of magnetism are real, and there are only two ways to live this life, as a deliberate creator or someone who lives by default. Either awake or asleep, the choice is yours. What we focus on expands, like attracts like; every action has an equal and opposite reaction. These are laws of science defined thousands of years ago by the yogis and confirmed in recent centuries by material scientists.

We live in a world of untrained minds. We mire in the minutia, focus on the negative, get stuck in the problem, overcomplicate meaning, and get trapped in trying. We miss what we are ready to put into action because we lack focus, so we ignore the teachings of a moment. We fall victim to the model of society which reveres the intellect and denies the spirit. We read books, attend conferences and talk our faces off about what we will start on Monday, but that is not how change occurs. We evolve only through experience by putting the knowledge we acquire into action; otherwise, the intellect becomes a waste of space. Applying the principles of yoga throughout our life positions us in harmony with universal law and the power of our essence. This is not how most people live; this is how the 1% live.

I consider those students in India a part of the 1%, for I had never received such insight as I did during that trip. The wisdom they shared with me during our short time together woke me up to a new way of seeing the world; its joys and

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horrors, my joys and horrors. The entire experience was a massive awakening for me. When I boarded the plane to Delhi in September 2009, I thought I was on a mission to bring peace through massage to refugees who needed it, as if they were in lack of it. I never considered that it was I who was in need. This experience set a new course for my life, leading me to where I sit now.

From time to time, I think about that night at the cafe and the hundreds of other moments shared in sacred communion with souls I was destined to meet on the other side of the globe. They showed me a new way to be and their wisdom remains strong within me still today.

In reading this book, I hope you become inspired to live against the grain alongside me. A way of being that allows you to stand with surefootedness and nullify doubt when all physical evidence reveals reasons to doubt. And I hope you seek the truth of what lies underneath the tiniest subatomic particle known to man living inside you right now. Because I know, if you do, you will discover the truth of what moves your breath and beats your heart. It is the one unchanging force in a universe that is always changing, the river of boundless energy that is you.

MB told me once that there are many doors in but only one door out. So, however your path gets you here, whenever you get here, and whoever you are here, know that you are right on time because it's this moment. The only one that will ever matter. This one, right now.