

GOOD CAMEL, GOOD LIFE



FINDING ENLIGHTENMENT
ONE DROP OF SWEAT
AT A TIME

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BEFORE



Chapter 1

Choosing to Breathe

*Breathing in I say,
"Thank you for being alive today."
Breathing out I say,
"Help me to appreciate each moment."*

—Thich Nhất Hahn

I was lollygagging again—taking photos, looking for bison, marveling at patches of golden aspens on sunlit hillsides. Ah, the sweet joy that is Yellowstone in the fall. Not a soul about, just the murmur of a gentle breeze moving across sagebrush steppe.

We had hiked in barely a half mile from the road, but my wife Kate and our friend Jennifer were already 100 yards ahead. A couple miles beyond them stood Electric Peak, covered in the year's first snow, a cold contrast to the warm September day yet an undisputable sign of the icy months to come. At that moment animals throughout Yellowstone were preparing for winter: elk and bison moving to lower grounds where snowpack would be slimmer and graze more plentiful; Clark's Nuthatches

hiding pine seeds to eat during the cold months; geese and swans flying off to warmer lands to the south; bears gorging themselves for the long hibernation ahead.

The previous night Kate, Jennifer, and I had decided to go on the hike. We had agreed that there would be no problem waiting until 9:30, until after my 8 AM yoga class, before departing Bozeman for the Park. Thus while Kate and Jennifer read the paper and drank morning espressos, I was turning and twisting and sweating, listening to my instructor talk about using my breath to calm my fears and reconnect my body and mind.

They picked me up out front of the studio and we drove 90 minutes to the north entrance of Yellowstone. Our plan was to enjoy a quiet walk from near Bunsen Peak out across Swan Flats and then down to the magnificent travertine terraces of Mammoth Hot Springs.

It was a great plan, but if I kept taking photos and reveling in the moment Kate and Jennifer would beat me to the Terraces by two hours. So I jogged a bit to rejoin my hiking mates, catching them just as they disappeared over a hill. As I slipped over the crest, suddenly they both turned back toward me, walking with great intent and purpose. As Kate glanced over her shoulder Jennifer said, “Grizzly—there’s a big grizzly beside the trail.”

My first reaction was to bolt. Less than heroic, I know, but I have a fear of grizzlies that at times can be gut-wrenching. Perhaps that doesn’t sound unusual. But interestingly after decades of walking through grizzly country I’ve come to realize that the fear is always strongest when I am only imagining the bear’s presence—

say a noise outside the tent at 3 AM. I've learned that it is the fear of the unknown, far more than fear of the bear, that grabs me.

So instead I took a deep breath.

Fear can sometimes cloud reality. Imagined fear emanates from the mind, and I have worked for years to learn to control it. Much of my yoga practice—including just a couple hours earlier that very morning—has spoken to using the breath to control the mind, to gain peace and find centeredness, and to overcome life's challenges and fears.

I took another breath.

This goal of controlling the mind in the face of fear is reflected in the words of the eighth century Buddhist master Shantideva, who said¹,

*If this elephant of mind is bound on all sides
by the cord of mindfulness,
All fear disappears and complete happiness comes.
All enemies: all the tigers, lions, elephants, bears, serpents...;
All of these are bound by the mastery of your mind,
And by the taming of that one mind, all are subdued....*

I took a third breath, then walked forward to join my two compatriots for a look at the bear. As so many times before, knowing that the grizzly was actually there, not some made up boogey man of the mind, turned the situation concrete and far less fearful. I stepped past Kate.

The big grizz stood in the sage brush perhaps 70 yards

¹ As quoted by Sogyal Rinpoche in The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying.

away. It was a large boar with a shoulder hump that jugged out prominently as it rooted around, head down. From our vantage we could not see the object of the bear's attention, but its behavior signaled the real possibility that it was feeding on a carcass, perhaps bison carrion or an elk calf that it had killed. The bear looked up once directly at us and then went back about his business, showing no indication of being agitated that we were invading his space.

The three of us took a collective deep breath, slipped back over the hill, and decided it best to hike somewhere else for the day.

A friend of mine once wrote that life is full of challenges, those that we choose and those that are thrust upon us. I know a bit about how challenges can be thrust upon us—possibly you do, too—in my case because of my wife Kate's bouts with cancer, recurrent cancer, and the remnant physical difficulties resulting from cancer treatment. We were once told that she would die within a year, a declaration that Kate *chose* not to accept.

Likewise my father would never have chosen Parkinson's Disease to be the defining challenge of the last part of his life. Like Kate, my father has fought with his disease, giving ground only grudgingly, seeking life first. Unlike cancer, however, where death so often seems to loom ever close, Parkinson's creeps insidiously into the fabric of day to day life, demanding ever more and more recognition until it is the core life experience for patient and family.

And indeed such health challenges do impact not just

the patient but the family, as well. Based on love there is no choice as to whether I will be an active part in caring for my wife. She is my favorite hiking partner, best friend, companion, and lover and I will do everything I can to help her when she needs me because I know she will do the same if the tables someday turn. Likewise I will always support my Mom and Dad when they need me in whatever way possible. They *already* have done the same for me.

Those are challenges *thrust* into my family's life. But in our affluent Western society, we are often privileged to *choose* some of our life challenges. Here I am thinking of challenges outside those resulting from our profession, concentrating more on those trials to which we voluntarily submit ourselves. Many such challenges are athletic—consider the marathoner or perhaps the swimmer at a masters' meet. Others are tied to challenging ourselves in nature—consider the backcountry skier or the big wall rock climber. Still other challenges might be more artistic or cerebral in design—consider the belly dancer or someone who has set themselves to read the classics.

I've been privileged enough through my years to choose to take on a number of such voluntary challenges. As a group these experiences make up the most memorable, vibrant, life-affirming moments of my life to date.

What would you remember if I asked you to name that time when you felt most alive? For me the answer would be easy: walking from Canada to Mexico along the Continental Divide Trail—roughly 3000 miles, five states, five years, two to three months each summer carrying a

backpack with little else to think about besides staying dry, a soft place to sleep, my next drink of water, and how much food we had left before the next pickup.

For you the answers might be far different. Being a parent... active duty in the military...caring for an ailing loved one... serving your church community...time as a Peace Corps volunteer. Whatever they are, I think that the times we all feel most alive have this in common: *we have passion for the cause.*

Along with passion, two other common threads weave together the memories that make up those times *I* felt most alive: time and physicality.

The first, time, is a commodity we all believe is in too short supply. It's been said that time is nature's way of making sure that everything doesn't happen at once. Yet it seems our lives today are set up to make just the opposite occur: who ever has enough time to handle everything life throws our way? Kids, work, travel, volunteer activities.... The list never ends. No sooner do we cross one item off the list than three more get added.

But does it have to be so? My most life-affirming experiences had a common aspect—Kate and I chose to give ourselves the gift of time. We made sure no jobs called. We fully committed to be present in our times of travel and exploration. For me, the mental freedom afforded by unscheduled time is an unparalleled gift. Never are my thoughts more clear and substantial, my creativity more keen, than when my mind is emptied of its inventory of “to-dos”.

This clarity of thought can be a step on the path

towards enlightenment; towards realizing that our potential is limitless; towards, as Sogyal Rinpoche defines as the central truth in Buddhist teaching, an awareness “that we are already essentially perfect.” But there is a key: *we must actively participate to achieve this awareness.* Through what we do; through the time we give ourselves. If we do not participate, awareness is lost. As Sogyal Rinpoche notes,

*Sometimes when the cell door is open,
the prisoner chooses not to escape.*

My life-affirming experiences, those times when I have felt closest to unraveling my own mysteries, have all been strongly physical in nature. Sol Luckman has written that “True enlightenment, in addition to being a mental state, appears to have *physical* consequences.” My sense is that the opposite is also true: rigorous physical effort engenders enlightenment. In this harried life of day-to-day chores how different it is to instead be forced to worry about a painful blister, the lack of water in the desert, the grizzly bear along the trail.

Why is it, by the way, that our senses become more acute in grizzly country? Suddenly my mind registers faint new smells and my ears pick up the sound of breaking twigs. Demanding physical activity helps us to remove the frivolous from our minds and focus on the fundamental, leading to improved awareness of self, and improved awareness of the world around us.

I find that yoga helps me in the same way.

Kate and I started yoga in the mid-90s as part of our healing after the radiation, chemotherapy, and the many surgeries associated with her recurrent cancer. We came to yoga innocently enough. Hewlett-Packard, in Corvallis Oregon where we lived and worked at the time, offered on-site yoga as part of its employee health and wellness plan. An hour to walk across the HP campus and decompress at lunch? And free? Super, sign me up.

HP contracted with a wonderful teacher, Sujita, who introduced us to “tree” yoga—a rhythmic, flowing, almost dance-like combination of yoga postures interspersed with breathing and focus exercises. I never did get the tree aspect of the yoga; I kept waiting for imagery about putting down strong roots and bearing fruit. It’s only recently that I’ve come to the realization that it was most likely TriYoga®, a style of yoga popularized by yogini Kali Ray.

I wasn’t too mindful in my early yoga days.

Regardless of my lack of understanding about just what I was doing, I found Sujita endlessly inspirational—to learn from, to listen to, to watch. She twisted and turned and moved her body in ways that seemed illegal. And she periodically worked me into knots I was unsure I would ever untie from. I’d simply lay there like a toasted pretzel until sometime before the end of class Sujita would come by to help me untangle my arms and legs and regain some sense of dignity. I always left class feeling happy that I survived, and—I soon came to realize—feeling a bit better physically and mentally than when I arrived.

Sujita tolerated me for several years until Kate and I

left HP and moved home to Montana. Years passed in Bozeman. I retained my interest in yoga but found no outlet for it. That is right up until I heard rumor of a new studio opening in town to be run by friends of friends, plus rumored to be a *hot* studio. I'd never heard of such a thing before. My interest was piqued.

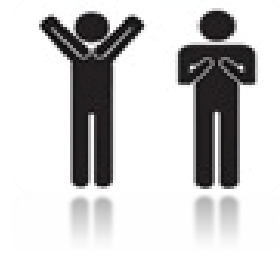
I've always been a masochist for heat and exercise. I live for 99 °F runs in August. So not only didn't heat scare me, it sounded *good*.

I met Chris and Rebekah, the owners of the new studio, through our mutual friends long before I ever stepped into one of their classes. Chris is on the lanky side, with little hair and often a devil-may-care look about him. Rebekah is dark haired with beautiful eyes and apple cheeks. Both exude wellness and vitality, with ready and vibrant smiles.

Early on as we were getting to know them, Kate and I canoed a remote Montana river with Chris and Rebekah, along with many other friends. Four days and three nights through some of the most beautiful country you could ever want to see: deep forest, towering sunset-orange cliffs, icy springs pouring from the hillsides, mostly clear blue skies. Mostly clear blue, that is, except for the first day when freezing rain sent us all into slickers and under tarps. In the morning, with everything sodden and most everyone holding on to hot coffee and wrapped in every piece of clothing they could find, I noticed Chris standing off to the side away from the main group.

Chris stood with his feet together, hands clasped under his chin. He brought his elbows together in front of

himself, then inhaled a single breath, deeply and slowly. At the same time he raised his elbows while keeping his head in position, looking straight ahead. From the look on his face, the rest of us seemed not to exist.



At the end of the breath Chris paused, his arms now lifted outward like chicken wings but knuckles still under his chin. Next he began to slowly exhale, forearms, elbows, and wrists coming directly in front of his face, forearms parallel to the ground, knuckles still under the chin, face now turned up to the sky. Several times he repeated the exercise, and each time I watched with great interest.

At that moment I had barely heard the name “Bikram” and certainly did not recognize Chris’s actions to be *Pranayama* breathing, the first breathing exercise in Bikram Choudhury’s yoga sequence. I did not know that Chris and Rebekah’s studio was part of a worldwide yoga movement, nor did I know that the movement centered around one man from India and his singular vision of bringing yoga to the masses of the West.

At that moment I only knew I was intrigued.