

Opening Your Heart to Bhutan by ted.com

You are cowering on the floor. Above you is an unknown man. He is pointing a gun at your head. He has your life in his hands. What matters to you now? What do you know which is of any use? This is the situation I found myself in in September 1997, in a hotel room in Jakarta, Indonesia. I believe it was the start of my awakening.

At the time of this incident, I was working in the financial markets in Hong Kong, making significant size investments for a global bank. I had made the decision to move into a financial career after the death of my father. He had always felt that I would suit such a career, and so I finished my studies in Fine Art and decided to grow up and get a proper job. And I loved it; it was fast, it was exciting. I had placements in New York, London, Hong Kong. I ate balance sheets for breakfast. (Laughter) I wore high heels and I walked with a wiggle. (Laughter)

And then came Jakarta. As the door opened, I took my chance and I ran. And my body escaped. But in the days that followed, I began to suffer what I was later to discover was severe post-traumatic stress disorder. In this condition, the past and the present know no difference. So I would be sitting in my office in Hong Kong, looking at those balance sheets, as I could smell his skin against my body, as I could hear his shoes moving back and forth towards me.

In the yogic and Buddhist tradition, we have a metaphor for the development of a human being - the total development of a human being - and it's that of the lotus flower. Now, the lotus flower begins in the mud, in the base of a lake, and from there it grows up, up, up, looking for light, looking for the Sun and the surface of the water. Jakarta was my mud. But it was also the seed of my future development. As I lay cowering on the floor, I knew the preciousness of a human life and I knew its impermanence. Also, a seed of compassion was planted, and I'll explain.

As I left, and I ran out of the door and down the corridor, behind me many armed men ran into the room. There was much gunfire. And later on that evening, when I sat down with the police, they showed me a photograph of the man. And he was slumped against the hotel wall in his underpants. And around him the spatters of blood, everywhere. And they were very pleased to show me this photograph. And I looked at it, and I felt such sorrow; such sorrow for this man, such sorrow for this situation. And this moment and this feeling, out of all of these moments and all of these feelings, is the one I don't forget.

Now, back in England I had help to recover from post-traumatic stress disorder. Once I had recovered enough to see my life clearly, I felt that I'd been treating it very

superficially, and that after this experience, I really needed to inquire more deeply into what it is to be a human being, what the potential of a human being might be. And so I resigned my job, and I stumbled across yoga, and I found I was naturally very adept at yoga. I pursued it, enjoyed it, and it helped me gain trust in myself and the world again. At the same time, I began to look more closely at a long-held interest in the nature of mind, particularly as described in Buddhist practice. And this is the reclining Buddha of my grandfather, which I saw as a child in our home, and which always I wanted to have near me, and that is still with me now.

As a result of this interest in Buddhism, I visited a Buddhist monastery. And I heard in this Buddhist monastery this mantra. It's called "The Great Mantra of Compassion." You see it and hear it all across the Himalayas. When I heard this mantra, it really touched something in me, something very deep in me, buried deep in me, I think. Now, there's many ways to say this mantra. With the risk of being spiritual X-factor, I'm going to just show you the way that I like to say it, okay? (Singing "The Great Mantra of Compassion") Something like that.

Now, I continued to teach yoga and meditation and investigate Buddhism for many years. And then I probably reached some kind of ceiling, here in the West. But I was lucky enough to get the opportunity to go to Bhutan, the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan, in 2011. And when I went there - that's somewhere I'd wanted to visit for a long time - I met a monk in a temple and something very profound happened. I returned to England and then I decided to go back to Bhutan to find him because something had happened there. So I returned to find him and discovered that he was a Lama. A Lama is someone in Bhutan who must have done at least three years, three months, three weeks solitary retreat. So he's somebody who's specialized in the nature of mind. And it was obvious that he was my teacher and I was his student. And after that, things went very fast.

Here's my Lama. (Laughs) Obviously, when I first met my Lama, I still had my hair and normal clothes, but in 2012 he said to me, out of the blue, "Now you change your dress," and he was telling me to become a Buddhist nun; he was telling me to give up lay occupation, to become celibate, and to train my mind for the benefit of others. I was amazed that he suggested it and, of course, said yes. (Laughs) So I began the preliminary practices and trainings of a nun: many prayers, many meditations. I began to study the language of Tibet, classical Tibetan language. And I kind of thought, "I'm peaceful now. I've made it." And as it says here, I was ready to put my slippers on, maybe look at the sky. But all that compassion practice, all those mantras, they had affected me, in fact. And I realized that I wanted to give back to Bhutan, the country that I love so much, and I also wanted to put my wish to be a compassionate person ... into action.

And so, in 2015, I founded this UK charity. It's called "Opening your heart to Bhutan." And this is a favorite thing of mine: to be with the children that we help. This is Tenzin Wangchuk in Eastern Bhutan. He has a cerebral palsy but he's a fantastic artist, and I'm there looking at his artwork with him. This is another child in East Bhutan who spontaneously just came and gave me this hug. This child is actually blind but came and hugged me.

And this is really why I do what I do in far-reaching places of Bhutan: bringing practical help, education, medical supplies, etc. to children who need my help. Of course, it's ironic now that my financial training is of great help in running a UK charity and running many projects in Bhutan, organizing many people, looking at the costings of things, inquiring about how to achieve things on the ground. So the skills of old have been very

useful in bringing me now a very meaningful and happy life.

Now, in terms of your own process of awakening, I would really like to share with you that your life is in your hands. But you should ask what matters to you now. What do you know which is of any use? More of what I know is here and here. Thank you very much. (Applause)

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