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Satopanth

A “Wake Up” Expedition

I don't know which story to tell you first. Shall I tell you that I fell dangerously asleep while ascending the mountain? Or, shall I tell you that I broke my bones while descending?

There were two words that saved me during both times: “wake up!”



LET ME START WITH THE FIRST STORY FIRST. When my being toggled precariously between states of consciousness and unconsciousness.

It was the 15th day of our expedition. All of us were well acclimatized and ready to summit Satopanth (literally, the path of truth). The mountain is the second highest peak in the Gangotri group in Uttarakhand. For me, it was my 12th high altitude exploration. I had crossed 6,000m five times before. Satopanth was a challenge I was ready and well-trained for. However, with high altitudes, anything can happen to anyone.

“Wake up!” Avilash kept saying every few minutes. He put something into my mouth. But my jaws couldn’t hold onto it. I couldn’t chew or swallow.

Avilash Bisht, the founder of White Magic Adventures, was our expedition leader. I’ve known him for years as someone who always led from the front - an excellent example for his team and clients alike. He sent the rest of group ahead and stayed back with me.

“Wake up!” I heard him say again. Something wasn’t right. We were at 6,450m, about 600m below the summit. It had been five or six hours since we began the ascent that night.

Time and space have no role to play when your consciousness is floating in the unknown. Since I have almost no memory of the details of what happened, I’ll let Avilash describe the episode.

Avilash: It was 4am. Initially, I thought some fluids, food and rest would wake you up. But that didn’t happen for over 10 minutes – that’s when I realized that this was something more serious. Your sleepiness was increasing. It took me more than an hour to rappel down to the top of the Knife Ridge with you. One hour. And you were still sleepy.

The NE Ridge or notoriously called the Knife Ridge isn’t exactly a place you’d want to sleep. It’s 800m long and plunges into the depths of Himalayas on either side. You have to meticulously traverse using fixed ropes on the ridge with about 10 inches of walking space. It’s easy to slip and fall off on either side even when you are fully awake. And here I was - unawake.

Avilash: It would’ve been quite dangerous to cross the Knife Ridge since you did not have a lot of control over your body. I called Nima to help me get you across the ridge. While Nima helped you rappel a certain section, I quickly referred to my first aid manual. Normally, altitude sickness starts with a condition called Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS). Unaddressed AMS can progress to high altitude pulmonary edema or cerebral edema. A line in the manual said that the edema can strike so quickly that you may not notice the stage of AMS. That made me panic a bit. That’s when I gave you dexamethasone. I asked you some questions to check your level of consciousness. Thankfully you answered them correctly. That gave me some hope!

Heading towards camp 2, in view on the right is the 800m long ridge making way for the summit face



With Avilash and Nima - in front of me and behind me - I was ready to descend this ridge. Just as we would with summits, we focused on the task at hand - one step at a time.

Avilash: I was planning to take you as far down as Camp 1. Ask for some oxygen and staff from base camp to help us rescue you. But around 7.30am - 2.5 hours later, you improved. I don't know if it was the sun or the drop on the sides of the ridge but suddenly you were a lot more attentive. We finished the Knife Ridge around 9am and reached Camp 2 (5,960m) around 10.15am.

Exhausted mentally and physically, I had some soup and rested in my tent. I reflected that not once did Nima or Avilash make me feel that what had happened was anything more than normal. Not once was I made to feel the burden of pulling away two key people from helping others on the summit climb.

We have a saying in the mountains. Until it's really over, it's never over. A small fall or a slip can change the course of your trek. Yes, it's time to tell you the second "wake up!" story - of how I broke my bones.

Climbs to summits have a base camp first and then advanced camps follow. Climbers acclimatize and settle in with altitude at every camp site. The challenges multiply from one camp site to the next. You descend via the same camps on your way back. Satopanth was no different.

The biggest challenge between Camp 1 and 2 is a steep rocky section, followed by a snow gully. You need to wear crampons (think of them as shoes with big nails) to traverse the icy terrains. But ascending or descending rocky surfaces with crampons adds to the difficulty.



As though the sleepy episode wasn't enough, life had more lessons to teach me at the end of this rocky section. On that first day of descent from Camp 2, I lost my balance and fell. The fall made me roll down in the snow for several feet. I had shooting pain that went straight up from my left ankle, all the way to the knee. Something was broken. It was unbearable. We had at least 3 hours left to reach Camp 1.

The first of the two rocky sections that had to be negotiated right at the start of the climb between Camp 1 & Camp 2



Dorjee, the guide nearest to me, tried to help me walk. He offered support to take the weight off my body but I was limping poorly. We decided to stop. I took two pain killers. After awhile, I figured out a way to drag my injured leg behind my steady one. We kept going.

Once we hit snow, it again became impossible to walk. We tried many different formats of walking yet nothing really helped. But I continued.

Through every step, my body, my mind was saying, "Wake up!" It wasn't all physical but life was using a unique way to say, "Wake up! Wake up!"

Closer to base camp, Sunny, another guide, took over. Changing from big boots with crampons to regular trekking shoes helped. I took a cocktail of codine and tylenol - that finally numbed my pain enough for me to complete the descent.

It took me six hours to reach camp, while others might have taken three or four hours. It was close to 9.30pm when I entered the dining tent to a full group waiting on me. I felt overwhelmed. I really didn't know how I did it. But here I was.

At that point, I realized that we were still at the beginning of our descent. We had three more days ahead of us till we approached the road. But somehow I knew I'd be able to do it.

Pain has a way of numbing not just the rest of your body but also your thoughts and emotions. Pain wakes you up from within. It demands all focus to itself and to your immediate surroundings. Perhaps, it's our mind's way of telling us to expend our energy on what's really important - the here and now.

For me, my condition made me take notice of the smallest gestures of kindness. Someone handed me a glass of Tang. Someone helped me with lights or my shoes. Someone simply smiled in understanding. In those moments, I experienced the goodness of people. Their kindness, care and patience. I felt extremely grateful for the whole human condition.

The rest of the days, Sunny walked alongside me. We would leave camp a couple of hours earlier after an early breakfast and a dose of painkillers. Sunny would patiently match my steps. He would wait for me, talk to me, distract me, laugh with me, at me, help me hold or maneuver through many tricky patches.

Almost the entire trail with its rocks and moraine constituted tedious walking. That would've been tough with two normal legs. And here I was with one. Ha.

When we have a disability or incapacity, our senses tune to human responses way more. You notice everything there is to notice. Most importantly, I noticed Sunny's pleasant presence and patience. He'd say, "Aap apna dekho!" whenever I worried about reaching camp at the same time as others.

In the corporate world, if we have to match pace with a slower team member, we aren't Sunny. We are far from being pleasant or understanding - in fact, we are quick to judge.

If anything, life taught me deep patience through these experiences. Sunny, Nima and Avilash showed me how to be helpful to someone in need without them feeling burdensome. To be helpful in the most ordinary way. Think about it. They stopped as many times as I needed a break, took out my water bottle from my bag as many times I wanted a sip, gave me a hand literally hundreds of times.

None of that kindness took Avilash and his team away from the stellar job they were doing as expedition leaders. Nine out of ten in our group summited. The Satopanth summit, at 7,075m is one of the highest places on earth that most human beings will ever physically climb. White Magic was well prepared to not only help clients summit but also handle a complex rescue situation.

How come we don't work this way down in the plains, in our big cities and sophisticated offices? How come we aren't as human as we could be, as we are meant to be? How come we dilute our greatness behind rigid conditioning? How come we don't have the courage to be compassionate and strong at the same time?

How come we don't dare to be extraordinarily ordinary? Isn't it time to wake up?

Divya

