

Global Spotlights

The physician and the monk

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It was a crisp September Saturday morning. There was a discerning, yet comfortable chill in the air, interspersed with the warmth from the piercing sun rays. Dr. Advait Kapoor, a practicing interventional cardiologist at a suburban community hospital in the USA, was looking forward to his 2-week annual leave, away from the busyness of his life as a practicing clinician, a father, and a researcher. He wanted to flee away from the cacophony, drama, and sabotage he had experienced at his workplace. He had never planned a vacation just for himself, until now—there were no travel plans with kids to exotic destinations; there were no conferences at the annual scientific sessions. He was going to Dharamsala, India, on a spiritual pilgrim, yearning for a journey within to rekindle with his own true self. Clearing through Customs and Border Protection in Delhi, he was brimming with excitement in anticipation of *Vipassana* meditation sessions from the monks in the hometown of The Dalai Lama.

Upon arrival to the monastery in the late evening, he was greeted by a beautiful, 8-year-old monk boy. With his head shaved and his torso wrapped in a burgundy robe, he emanated peace and serenity. 'What's your name?' inquired Advait.

'Ramanand, Sir', replied the monk boy with a glistening smile on his face, 'they call me Ram'. 'Let me guide you to your lodge', commented the monk boy, whilst smiling.

As they were walking down the hill, Advait saw a monk's silhouette against the sunset. The deep meditation posture of the monk amidst the penultimate rays of the setting sun made for a picturesque scenery. It also invoked a sense of deep calm and peace in Advait's soul, a feeling he forgot ever existed. 'Ram, I see we are getting close to the lodges. Do me a favor; just drop my luggage in lodge #91. I'll see you for the evening prayer', commented Advait. He gave Ram a high-five, as he started walking towards the monk. The monk was preparing to leave his *sādhana*, when Advait interjected, 'Namaste, I'm Advait'.

'Namaste', replied the monk, 'Welcome to Dharamsala'.

'I could not hold myself to walk up to you', commented Advait, 'Your silhouette emanated enviable peace'.

The monk smiled, whilst holding Advait's folded hands in his palms. 'God bless you', said the monk, with unparalleled benevolence in his voice.

'How do you stay so calm? Have you ever been wronged? How do you dissipate your anger?' Advait could not hold back his questions he had for the monk, having flashbacks of sabotage at his workplace.

'I'm here for you, Advait. Get some rest; I will see you at 4 a.m. for the morning prayer'.

As the monk walked past, Advait immersed himself in the moment—light breeze, the setting sun amidst the lush green mountain tops, and the melody of the flute Ram was playing by his side. He felt blessed. 'Let's go, Ram. I have an early start to the day tomorrow.'

After the morning prayer, as Advait sat underneath a tree studded with colourful prayer flags, the monk continued, 'Advait, if you may, see your life unfold, whilst being a mere spectator. What I mean is to try and be a witness of your life events, without identifying yourself as the doer'.

'I am not sure what you mean. How is that possible?' questioned Advait.

'It is possible, Advait. Dispassionately see your life events unfold, whilst performing honest action, for the same action can result in experiences of either pleasure or pain', the monk explained. 'What fruits your actions will bear is not in your control. And you must learn to let go of what is not in your control, as hard as it may be.'

Advait started to lean in with more curiosity and focus. 'I've been wronged at my workplace. I had been performing my job with dedication and sincerity, yearning to continually finesse my skillset as an operating interventional cardiologist, whilst taking care of my patients and doing my best to help them. I had a couple unforeseen adverse events, and experienced sabotage in the form of a malicious peer-review conducted in bad faith.'

'Did you intentionally partake in the outcome you ascribe this adversity to?' asked the monk. 'No. Of course, not', replied Advait.

'Then let go of the outcome, for the same action has also gotten you glory in the past, of having saved lives and garnering praises for your skill', replied the monk. 'That's what I meant when I said to not identify yourself as the doer, and to only focus on the action, letting go of the results of your actions.'

'How do you live a life not focused on the outcomes of your actions?' asked Advait. 'How can I perform my best action if I do not care about the results of my actions?'

'It is possible, Advait. In fact, it is the only way of living the most skillful life, of that of purposeful action without the expectation of anticipatory fruit. What matters the most is the intent with which you perform the action. If your intent was to save a life, but you ended up not saving it, you have done everything you could do

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Figure 1 The monk replied, 'Most importantly, I learned the value of only staying focused to one's own intended action; the Bhagavad Gita calls it Karmayoga. If we can all train ourselves to say what we think, and do what we say (alignment of thought, word, and action), and offer all our doings (actions) for the greater good, detaching ourselves from the results of our actions, there may never be burnout, depression, and suicide.'

through your volition', answered the monk. 'How do I explain this to the metric- and outcome-driven world of corporate American healthcare?' inquired Advait. 'The corporate American healthcare will not appreciate the nuances of purposeful action with no expectation of anticipatory fruit.'

'Well, Advait, therein lies the inherent fault-line of the corporate American healthcare system. You may think you are part of the world's best healthcare system. However, look around you; physician burnout, depression, and suicide are at their highest in comparison with prior historical controls.' The monk continued, 'I am not advocating for not finessing one's skill as an operator or lack of accountability toward

medical decision-making; however, each adverse outcome ought to be contextualized and appropriately risk-adjusted prior to painting the picture of a bad doctor or a surgeon. Proceduralists go through years of (sacrifice and) intense training to get good at their craft; only they can appreciate and understand what it takes to become one'.

Advait sensed a passionate pain in the monk's voice, which resonated deeply with his own, as if the monk had vicariously lived through his own perturbations at work. 'How did you identify so impeccably with the pain that I have lived through? Is this your spiritual power?' Advait was both fascinated and intrigued.

'Because I am one of you, Advait', replied the monk.

Advait was dumbfounded. 'What do you mean?' questioned Advait in a tone of astonishment. 'I was a practicing cardiac surgeon in the US, and had a growing practice. For reasons unbeknownst to me, my peers colluded with the hospital administration to conjure up a peer-review. Despite presenting data on clinical outcomes comparable with my peers, the hospital administration utilized it as a springboard for my untimely ousting from the practice. I went through phases of anger, deep angst, depression, erosion, frustration, and moral injury. I could have even succumbed to my emotions, making the headlines for yet another physician suicide. However, thanks to an accidental evening of an online discourse with Matthieu Ricard, the happiest person in the world, I began to rekindle with my true inner-self. Through practices of mindfulness and *Vipassana* meditation, I was gradually able to both reconcile and heal from my past. Most importantly, I learned the value of only staying focused to one's own intended action; the *Bhagavad Gita* calls it *Karmayoga*. If we can all train ourselves to say what we think, and do what we say (alignment of thought, word, and action), and offer all our doings (actions) for the greater good, detaching ourselves from the results of our actions, there may never be burnout, depression, and suicide' (Figure 1).

Advait listened to the monk with unflinching attention. 'Did you ever decide to go back to resume your surgical practice?' asked Advait.

'I never felt the desire, Advait. The motivation to pursue Medicine as a career was to make an impact on people's lives. I was certainly able to impact my patients' lives as a practicing surgeon through knowledge, intelligence, and skill. In the past 5 years, however, I have garnered true enlightenment and wisdom, which I now yearn to share with humanity at large, but most importantly with the physician community. I have been able to connect the dots, and look behind with poise to understand why certain events occurred in my life. I wish I had this wisdom whilst garnering the knowledge

during medical training; I am certain it would have made me a better physician for my patients. Now that I am empowered with this wisdom, I want to share it with my medical community, enabling them to become better caregivers for their patients, their families, and also themselves. This is the only path to curb the menace of physician burnout.' 'And what about those who got you here? Don't you feel wronged by what your peers did to you?' asked Advait.

'That, Advait, is their action. It will create their path. If anything, I am grateful to them. Each of us have our own paths; their action became the catalyst for my inner discovery.'

Advait felt a sense of calm and empowerment. He thanked the monk for his invaluable time.

As he walked away into the dusky sky, the monk smiled and said to himself, 'I am grateful to have encountered another physician soul who found its way to discovering the true inner-self, away from the calamity of the corporate American healthcare'.

Data availability

No new data were generated or analysed in support of this research.

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