

BEYOND LIFE AND DEATH



JET LI

THE WAY OF TRUE FREEDOM

BEYOND LIFE AND DEATH

THE WAY OF TRUE FREEDOM

JET LI

WITH ALEXANDER NEMSER

Tarcher
an imprint of Penguin Random House
New York



Tarcher

an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019

penguinrandomhouse.com

Copyright © 2026 by Jet Li

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture.

Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for every reader. Please note that no part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems.

Tarcher is a registered trademark of Penguin Random House LLC, and Tarcher with leaf design is a trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

Cover design: Jess Morphew

Cover photograph: EJ Camp

Book design by Angie Boutin, adapted for ebook by Cora Wigen

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file.

Hardcover ISBN 9780593855072

Ebook ISBN 9780593855096

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin

Do2 YH68, Ireland, <https://eu-contact.penguin.ie>.

prhid_prh_7.4a_155938167_co_ro

CONTENTS

DEDICATION

PREFACE: BEYOND LIFE AND DEATH

CHAPTER 1:

WHO AM I?

CHAPTER 2:

LIFE IS MOVEMENT

CHAPTER 3:

THE SECRET TO SELF-DEFENSE

CHAPTER 4:

SEPARATE THE BITTERNESS FROM THE PAIN

CHAPTER 5:

SEE THE SKIES BEYOND THE SKY

CHAPTER 6:

SEARCHING FOR NUMBER ZERO

CHAPTER 7:

BE A GRANDSON TO THE WORLD

CHAPTER 8:

THE GIFT OF SURRENDER

CHAPTER 9:
MAKE ALL OF LIFE YOUR TRAINING

CHAPTER 10:
BECOME A CHILD AGAIN

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For all who seek a mind both happy and free

PREFACE

BEYOND LIFE AND DEATH

All human beings want two things: health and happiness. Most of us spend time thinking about how to be healthy, making a point to exercise, eat nourishing food, rest when we're tired, and see the doctor when we're sick. We consult the latest science promising longevity and make purchases based on advertisements promising glamour.

Few of us, however, reflect deeply on how to be happy. We readily train the body and neglect to train the mind. But if we are healthy on the outside, yet miserable on the inside, we will suffer.

To achieve lasting happiness, body and mind must be in balance. Both must be cultivated for us to walk the middle path without being pulled into extremes.

So many of us today seek something outside of ourselves to bring us peace, instead of looking within. We base our happiness on the expectations of family and culture, comparing our progress with our peers or with flashy images of successful people. When life is going our way, we feel full of vitality and inspiration; but when we encounter obstacles and setbacks, our spirits plunge. The result is an endless cycle of chasing and grasping.

Cultivating lasting, unshakable happiness means taking the time to ask, *Who am I, really? What does true freedom look and feel like for me? Where can I find a sense of meaning and*

purpose that will endure through the inevitable ups and downs of life?

Throughout my early martial arts success and my explosion onto the screen as an action star, I reached great heights of achievement: winning the national all-around championship in wushu, Chinese martial arts, five years in a row; being chosen to play the lead in *The Shaolin Temple* and becoming recognized all over Asia; bursting onto the world's stage as an action star in the fast-growing film industry of Hong Kong. My success carried me out of poverty and allowed me to fulfill my childhood dream: ensuring the financial security of my mother and my siblings.

Yet for all the excitement of these worldly heights, the satisfaction I felt from these milestones was fleeting. Before one triumph had even ended, I was already chasing the next, pulled in countless directions seeking fame, adoration, wealth, and power. My desires and fears ruled over my mind like the cruel tyrants I'd face off against in my martial arts films; they were my boss, and I was their employee. Because I hadn't trained my mind, no amount of external success could free me from their hooks. I began to suspect that the external goals of life and the shiny touchstones of success did not contain the secret to long-lasting happiness that I had believed they promised.

This sent me on a lifelong journey to discover a source of peace, well-being, and contentment that could endure beyond all worldly ups and downs. Through much practice, effort, and guidance, I gradually learned the truth of my own nature—the truth that each of us is our own boss. As I learned to observe my life from within, watching my desires and fears come and go, I started to recognize my nature as a human being with the capacity to be free. As I did, I saw countless Jet Lis die away, disclosing a vision of freedom beyond any concrete goal. I

started to become my own boss. I'm still working at it. You can, too.

This is the beginning of going beyond life and death.

To go beyond life and death means liberating yourself from the endless cycle of suffering to live each moment with greater freedom and meaning; watching all the familiar markers of your identities arise and pass away; and flowing with the continuous movement of being. It means finding the courage to act boldly and explore yourself within.

When we live this way, we embody the Chinese concept of *zizai*. *Zi* means “self,” and *zai* can mean “to exist” or “to be present.” Together, they suggest rich and nuanced layers of meaning, evoking a state far beyond ordinary freedom. Conventional freedom means doing anything we want without restraint. Like a wind, we want to blow wherever our whims and desires take us, altering the landscape to suit our preferences, unrestricted and unconstrained. But *zizai* is the freedom of a cloud. Unlike the wind, a cloud is not driven by desires or fears. It is content with wherever it is and whatever shape it takes, passing through countless transformations without friction. It neither judges, clings, nor resists.

Yet *zizai* is not passive. The person who embodies it exudes quiet assuredness, knowing she's her own center of gravity, flowing effortlessly amidst ever-changing circumstances. No longer jerked around by desire or aversion, she moves with the unshakable ease of someone who has shed the weight of likes and dislikes. Perfectly at home, unburdened and utterly alive, she is simply here.

This is freedom beyond freedom: not the ability to do anything, but the liberation from the need to control anything. Here, our narrow, limited sense of self dissolves into the boundlessness of the universe itself. Language strains to de-

scribe it, because zizai is not a concept—it's the embodied experience of being perfectly at home in the universe, unburdened and utterly alive, yet beyond self, beyond life, and beyond death.

• • •

OVER THE YEARS, FRIENDS OF mine, along with editors from publishing houses at home and abroad, have encouraged me to share my story with the public.

They asked me, “Why don’t you write a book? You’ve led such a unique life!”

But I always declined.

I didn’t want to be attacked for boasting or trying to preach. And if the true meaning of my life, like any human life, is always evolving, ungraspable in thought and inexpressible in words, why waste any more time trying to describe it?

After much ambivalence and hesitation, I changed my mind about writing a book. With guidance from my teachers, I came to see that my experience, both my successes and my struggles, might be a light that ignites a spark within others to inspire them on their own journeys.

In that spirit, I will share the insights of my own path: my own quest to know myself beneath any and all of my worldly identities, my painful discovery of the truth of impermanence, and my secret to self-defense. I’ll take you through how I learned to work with physical pain, face failure and disillusionment, devote my energy to helping others, and make all the messiness of life a training ground for liberation.

My intention with this book is to simply share my experience. It’s not eternal wisdom. If you want to find the truth beyond life and death, you will have to discover it for yourself.

I wish you the persistence, courage, compassion, and guidance to do so.

CHAPTER 1

WHO AM I?





My path through life has given me many names. Each name tells part of my story, but none of them expresses the whole truth of my being.

My given name is Li Lianjie. In Chinese, names contain not only the surname and personal name, but often also a character that designates which generation of the family you belong to. Li is my surname, Lian is my generational name, and Jie is my personal name. This tells me that I'm my father's son in the patrilineal descent of all my ancestors on his side, and that I'm the brother of my siblings. Although my father died when I was two, I carry his memory in my name.

I went by Li Lianjie until I was seventeen. From 1975 to 1979, starting at age twelve, I won the all-around wushu championship in China five years in a row, proving I was the strongest competitive martial arts practitioner in the nation. Li Lianjie was the name I won with.

In 1982, I acted in my first movie, *The Shaolin Temple*. When the movie was about to be released in the Philippines, the publicity team at that time thought Li Lianjie was too difficult for English-speakers to pronounce. They decided we needed a different name for that market. I remember I saw a promotional poster for the movie from the Philippines, and it listed my name as Jet Li.

I asked them, "Why Jet Li?"

They said, "Jet sounds like Jie, your personal name. And you move so fast, you're like a jet!"

I liked the idea of something moving fast, driven by a powerful engine, but honestly, I didn't care how my name was listed. I just wanted the movie to be successful. To this day, I still don't know exactly who came up with the name Jet Li, but to most of the world, that has been my name ever since.

The Shaolin Temple became a massive success. In the film, I played a young warrior monk named Jue Yuan. After the film's release, I became Jue Yuan in many people's minds. If they saw me on the street, they would call out, "Jue Yuan!" Years later, when I played the folk hero Wong Fei-hung in the *Once Upon a Time in China* films, the same thing happened. Depending on which name the fan cried out to me in the street, I could tell which movie they loved most.

In the eighties, I received the first of several names given to me through my spiritual inquiries. I was studying with a master of Taoism, an ancient root of Chinese thought. In the Taoist tradition, it is customary for a teacher to give you a new name to acknowledge the beginning of your journey. My teacher gave me the name, Tian Yuan: Tian means "sky" or "heaven," and Yuan means "fate."

As my film career expanded and my fame grew, I received another name to mark my new identity. In 1987, Jin Yong, the world-renowned author of wuxia stories, tales of martial artists in ancient China, gave me a "courtesy name." This is a formal designation given to young men in their twenties. The name was Yang Zhong: Yang meaning "sun" or "masculine" because my father died when I was young; Zhong meaning "center." It was an initiation into greater freedom within my pursuit of film success. I felt imbued with a newfound confidence and independence that inspired me to start my own film production company, choosing the kinds of films I wanted to act in and the kinds of stories I wanted to tell.

When I began studying with Buddhist masters, the names kept coming. In Tibetan Buddhism, names aren't just identifiers. They carry blessings, aspirations, and often the qualities a teacher wants to emphasize or instill in a student. I hold Dharma names from Lho Kunsang Rinpoche, the Karmapa, Yangthang Rinpoche, and Mingyur Rinpoche, all of whom have served as guiding forces in my formal practice and my everyday life.

In 1997, Lho Kunsang Rinpoche first gave me the name Ngodrub Dorje, which evoked a revelation as instantaneous as a thunderbolt. Then in 2003, I made my first pilgrimage to India. While there, a great teacher, the Karmapa, gave me a name which he had heard in a dream before my arrival: Karma Nyingjei Bu, which means Son of Compassion. This name intimidated me at first, and I struggled inwardly to live up to it, but it ultimately changed the course of my life, inspiring me to devote myself to philanthropic work.

From Li Lianjie to Jet Li to Jue Yuan, Yang Zhong and Tian Yuan, Ngodrub Dorje and Karma Nyingjei Bu, I have held many different names. The names people call me depend on the occasion: how they relate to me, who they perceive me to be, what they want from me, and what they hope for me. Each of these names has its own meaning, but which one is me? Am I more my father's son, my siblings' brother, a powerful jet engine, a young Shaolin monk, a thunderclap, or a lotus?

At the end of the day, who am I when all my roles are stripped away?

Over six decades, I've watched my life progress through name after name, identity after identity, and observed their impermanence. Some names have followed me my whole life; others appeared and disappeared within a single season. All of them are dependent on context—where I stand and where the

one addressing me stands. Yet I have also witnessed that there is something in me that endures beneath each name that cannot be expressed by any label. Who is watching beneath all these identities?

• • •

WHEN I CONTEMPLATE THE QUESTION “Who am I?” the first thing I remember is that I almost wasn’t born at all.

In 1963, my mother was leaving the large communal courtyard outside of the apartment in Beijing where she lived with my father, my two older brothers and two older sisters, and my father’s parents, when she ran into her own mother. The sudden appearance of my grandmother startled and confused my mother. My grandmother lived far away in a province in north-eastern China, and the journey to Beijing took many hours. Although she visited once or twice a year, she always sent a telegram ahead telling my mother where and when to pick her up. This time there was no telegram. My grandmother just showed up unannounced. My mother asked why she had decided to visit so abruptly. Parrying her question, my grandmother asked my mother in turn where she was going. My mother hedged, murmured something inaudible, and tried to slip past her.

My grandmother squinted at my mother and asked her, “What’s going on?” She could smell a scheme.

My mother tried to keep going, but my grandmother wouldn’t let her. She blocked her way, talking insistently, and pushed my mother back into the apartment. Then she confronted my father and his parents: “What’s going on? What are you doing? Where is she going?”

My grandmother harried them until they broke down and finally revealed the truth: My mother was pregnant, and she

was on her way to get an abortion. My grandmother was horrified. Her feelings rose in an uproar, and she started yelling and berating my family: “This is the child I asked for from Manjushri bodhisattva on Mount Wutai! I’ve been practicing every day at the altar, begging and pleading, praying and purifying. This child is your family’s blessing! You have never known good fortune, and now the child who will bring you fortune is coming and you want to abort it?! Your whole family will have to rely on him in the future!”

My father’s parents, who were more educated and somewhat wealthier than my grandmother, were confused, while my mother stood there ashamed. No one said anything. Eyes burning, this small old woman kept everyone paralyzed.

My grandmother’s warnings came from her deep spiritual life. When she was sixteen, she had a vivid dream in which she died. In the dream, while her family went through all the traditional practices for her death, an angel came and brought her to the top of Mount Wutai. In China, there are many holy places held to be sacred sites in Buddhism and Taoism, most important the four sacred mountains: Mount Wutai, Mount Emei, Mount Jiuhua, and Mount Putuo. In the Buddhist tradition, each of the four sacred mountains is believed to be the earthly abode of a great bodhisattva, a being who dedicates themselves to the alleviation of suffering. Mount Wutai is the earthly abode of Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom. From the time of her dream, my grandmother formed a special relationship with Manjushri and Wutai Mountain.

But what did this have to do with the unborn child in my mother’s womb? My grandmother regarded my mother’s life as particularly difficult. Always putting herself last, my mother worked hard caring for my siblings, my father, and his parents, who lived with my family. My grandmother longed to improve

her daughter's circumstances and make her life easier. Inspired by her dream and her passionate folk beliefs, she prayed ceaselessly to Manjushri on Mount Wutai to send down his power of good fortune into my mother's womb and deliver her a child who would take care of her. This child was me, and my own karma would be intimately bound up with this bodhisattva of wisdom and with Mount Wutai.

Back in the family living room, my family was locked in a heated debate. How could they possibly be sure that what my grandmother was saying was true? Wouldn't another child put an unnecessary burden on the family? My parents had already aborted one child before me, believing they didn't have the resources to take care of it and to give it a good life. Could they really let superstition and folk customs win out over reality and good common sense?

But my grandmother was stubborn. She unleashed a torrent of warnings and passionately insisted this child would change all their lives. In the end, they gave in, and my grandmother persuaded my mother to keep me. I have a feeling they weren't really convinced; they were just exhausted.

When I was growing up, my grandmother told me the stories of Manjushri on Mount Wutai: his strength, his power, his staff, and his vow to protect. I loved my grandmother. She was very kind to me and brought me all kinds of small gifts and tokens. As a young boy, I loved her stories, but I didn't take them very seriously. The rest of my family treated her as if she were a bit mentally unstable. They wrote her off because she was always talking about some angel holding a strange weapon and performing a fantastic miracle of magic. No one gave too much thought to her bizarre stories about my origin or her outlandish predictions of my success. But she embodied for me

the intuition that there was more to life than the daily cares and concerns of the material world.

My father was an architectural engineer. His work dealt with the interior engineering necessary for erecting large buildings, including pipes, fixtures, drainage systems, and fire compliance. His main project was the central building for China Central Television, the country's national television broadcaster, built in Beijing in 1965. After the completion of that building, he moved on to work on the same kind of headquarters for the television station in Shanghai.

The project was on a rapid schedule, and my father worked feverishly to complete it. One sunny day, when the weather was very hot, my dad complained of a headache. Suddenly he collapsed and was taken to the hospital. Initially, the doctors thought he had a cold. They gave him an IV and released him.

The next day, he died. He had had a brain aneurysm. I was two years old.

I couldn't understand the full implications of my father's death. I remember that, according to Chinese tradition, I was given a black armband to wear as a mourner. During the Cultural Revolution, young people who had demonstrated virtuous behavior or accomplishment had the honor of wearing a red handkerchief as part of their uniform. It was like a merit badge. Exceptional teenagers were honored with a red armband. So I understood that handkerchiefs and armbands were a special honor.

After my father's funeral, I danced around proudly displaying my black armband to the other kids in the yard. "Look! I have this special armband!" I told them, showing it off.

The teenagers in the yard rolled their eyes. They said, "No, red is the good color. Yours is black. It means someone died."

I stood in the courtyard crying. I suffered terribly from that. My dad was gone.

Losing my father made me reflective at a young age. I wondered why life was the way it was, where people went when they died, why people acted the way they did. The first inkling of an answer came to me in Taoism, one of the fundamental philosophical bases of Chinese culture. The most well-known and representative symbol of Taoism is the yin-yang diagram, also known as the *taijitu*. The image is made up of a circle with an S-shaped curve running through the middle, dividing the circle into two halves: one half black and one half white. The black half is yin, and the white half is yang. Together, the yin and yang make up the Tao or the way. Tao is the underlying principle of the universe: yin and yang contain each other, give rise to each other, transform into each other, ceaselessly.

While making my film *The One* in 2001, I explored making this image the centerpiece of the choreography. I played both the hero and the villain, and in the climax of the film, they face off against each other in a final battle. Hero and villain represent the duality of opposites: light and dark, good and evil, passive and active—all interconnected and interdependent. To distinguish between the two characters, the fight choreographer Corey Yuen and I gave each character a distinctive martial arts style that expresses their personalities, as well as the energies they represent. The villain uses Xingyiquan, which embodies yang with linear, aggressive, direct strikes that rely on explosive power. By contrast, the hero uses Baguazhang, which evokes yin through evasion, open-palm strikes, and elusive circle-walking to dodge attacks and counter with flowing movements. As the combat unfolds, the styles balance each other and turn each other on their heads. They become a living taijitu. Their movements mirror each other as two halves of one

whole. Soft answers hard; flow counteracts rigidity. This is the eternal dance of yin and yang, the constant flux of life as movement.

Even as a young child, I understood that the swirl within the circle indicates that it is rotating, not static. Black is always transforming into white; white is always flowing into black. Blood and bone come together to become a father, then dissolve back into water and earth. Moreover, I perceived that in the thickest part of the black half, there is a white dot, and in the thickest part of the white half, there is a black dot. This means that even in the most extreme example of something, we find a little bit of its opposite. There's no absolute black and there's no absolute white. Nothing is either completely good or completely bad.

As a child, I was always trying to talk about these things to my siblings, but they just gave me blank looks. I did most of my thinking alone.

My brothers and sisters were right to be preoccupied with more pragmatic concerns than the hidden order of the cosmos. Losing our father meant we had to fend for ourselves. Without his income, we lived in poverty and our finances were precarious. At that time, the government subsidized each child at 10 yuan per month. Our household of five children received 50 yuan per month, plus my mother's monthly salary of 40 yuan, for a total of 90 yuan per month, about \$37. We needed to make this money stretch to cover us five children, my mother, and my grandparents, as well as other family members. The financial pressure was immense. When she heard the news of my father's death, my grandmother reminded me: "Manjushri came down from up in the mountains with his sword so you could be born. It's your destiny to protect your family and take care of your mother!"

I took this directive to heart. I remember one incident in the days leading up to Chinese New Year when I was five. My mother and I were out shopping, busily buying gifts and supplies for the upcoming celebration, when her wallet was stolen. The wallet contained 30 yuan. Without these 30 extra yuan, our family couldn't afford the month's living expenses. When my mother discovered the loss, she broke down and cried until she fainted right there in the commercial street. My five-year-old self was terrified! My mother's despair and my own sense of helplessness left a deep and lasting impression. As I knelt beside her unconscious body, I understood the profound importance of money and the fragility of my family situation. A vow was burned into my mind: "I must make money to support my mother, my siblings, and my family!"

This became my fervent hope. It was, in a way, my first experience of taking on the identity my grandmother had given me as the family's protector. I felt the need for safety in my bones, and safety meant money. I had no idea what to do next. I only knew I had to do everything in my power to help. This role defined my life for the next twenty years.

Until I was eight, my life was like any ordinary boy's in China at that time. Then in the summer of 1971, I was sent to what is now called the Beijing Sports and Exercise School. During the summer, students from all the primary schools in the area were sent there for a month of sports to keep them off the streets and out of trouble. The school divided us up arbitrarily into classes: Class 1 went to gymnastics, Class 2 to swimming, Class 3 to soccer, and Class 4 to wushu. I had no idea what wushu even was—none of us did—but if the teacher said practice, we practiced! Each grade was split up in the same way, so each sport had a total of about 1,000 students ranging from first to sixth graders. Everyone spent about two and a half

hours each day training in our respective sports. We thought this was great. Most of us had nothing better to do in the summer anyway.

When school started again in the fall, almost all of the thousand kids who had been learning wushu were cut from the team and told they didn't have to come back. For them, it was just a fun summer pastime where they got to practice some martial arts. About twenty of us, though, were told that we were to come back to the sports school every afternoon after regular classes to continue training. It became a point of pride for schools to boast how many kids had been chosen from their ranks. I remember that there were five or six of us from my school, but I was the only one from my grade. I didn't know at the time that this would set a precedent for me of being a young challenger among older, stronger competitors.

Being selected out of a thousand made you rather famous in your class. Everybody else had been rejected, but I was special! Nobody, least of all me, knew why I'd been asked to continue training, but it was a terrific feeling. And no one except my grandmother could perceive that my destiny was already starting to reveal itself. Soon I was displaying such an innate aptitude for martial arts that my instructors commented that I must have mastered martial arts in my previous lifetimes.

People often ask me about my early prowess with martial arts. Was I some kind of prodigy? My answer is that from the time I was a young boy, I was always asking, "Why?" I seemed to stand outside of life, observing it from a distance: "Why are things the way they are? Why are we doing it like this and not like that?" My siblings never understood what I was talking about. They were content with the business of life, not the structure underneath.

So when our training started to get serious and the coach said, “Do this one thousand times!” most of my schoolmates just did it a thousand times. Others were tired: They wanted to escape the torment and practiced the movement five hundred times. But I asked, “Why a thousand?” I thought about the reason and the result before I practiced it. The reason is that an athlete needs to put in energy and repetition to develop skill. But what is the desired result? Perfect execution of the movement.

If you perform a movement a thousand times without thinking, you’re just working your body. You’re not using your mind. The body moves a thousand times, but your mind doesn’t move at all. You may not even be paying attention to the movement. You’re focused only on the number, not on the desired result. Why drill the movement a thousand times? To make sure you develop muscle memory so your body is completely familiar with the movement and can execute it perfectly every time. But if I use my mind, I can say, “I’m going to do this seven hundred times, each time perfectly.” I pay attention every time I do the movement. I unify my body and my mind. Then I don’t need to do it a thousand times because my body will remember the perfect movement after only seven hundred times. I wanted to get the benefit of a thousand repetitions with only seven hundred movements.

I was always looking for a shortcut, but I never slacked off. I never said, “Oh, I’ll just do it a hundred times.” If I didn’t work hard enough, the physical component wouldn’t be strong enough. I needed to get the body and mind in balance to produce the result I wanted—quickly and perfectly. As a result of my way of thinking, I had a different target than my peers did. Their target was to reach the number 1,000; mine was to achieve the result of perfect execution in the shortest amount

of time. So every time I did the movement, I contemplated it before I executed it. This way of practicing came naturally to me, and it would characterize my approach not only to martial arts, but later to filming and to Buddhist practice.

Within a matter of days, my cohort of twenty wushu students went through another massive round of cuts, leaving only four of us. Those of us who were left joined the other ten or so students who had started wushu during the previous year's winter vacation. Together, we began a training period that became increasingly rigorous. For eight hours a day, six days a week, we learned multiple wushu styles, including Changquan, with its whirling acrobatic kicks, and Fanziquan, whose movements are quick and forceful like a dragon swirling in the clouds. The training was unrelenting. Because the school had no indoor facilities, we had to practice outside during the brutal Beijing winter. Our frozen hands hurt constantly. At one point, I trained for two days on a broken ankle because I was too afraid to tell my coach I was injured.

When I turned nine, I began preparing for my first competition. It was the first national wushu competition held in China since the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. There would be no official placings or prizes, so technically it wasn't a standard competition yet, just a grand demonstration of forms. Only a single award would be issued: The best performer was going to be recognized for excellence. Still, the best athletes from all over China were coming to perform. The competition was going to be held in Jinan, the capital of Shandong Province. It would be my first time leaving home, and my first time venturing out of Beijing. I was so excited to ride the train. My mother, however, was heartsick that her baby was going so far away from home. The morning I was set to leave, she wept. I felt awful and torn and offered not to go. But the world was calling

me, and so was my fate. I reached Jinan—the train ride was indeed amazing—and I made a great effort at the event. In the end, I won the award for excellence. This was the beginning of an incredible streak of wushu victory.

First, I was offered a place on the Beijing wushu team, with whom I performed a martial arts display at the inaugural All-China Games. Later that year, I competed in the All-China Youth Championships, where I won my first official national championship title. The next year, China began preparations to stage its Third National Games. The National Games are like a domestic version of the Olympics; they include all competitive sports: swimming, gymnastics, track and field, and so on. Like the Olympics, they were intended to be held every four years. However, in the twenty-five years since the founding of New China, they'd managed to hold it only twice in the fifties before the Cultural Revolution put everything on hold. So the 1975 National Games were only the third since Liberation—and the first since the Cultural Revolution. For the government, it was an extremely important event with great symbolism, and the entire nation shared in its sense of significance.

As we prepared for the competition, I noticed a shift in my training. The pressure began to increase. People had higher expectations of me because I'd just won the youth championship. Personally, I didn't think too much of it. I knew that there were plenty of other athletes who trained a lot harder than I did, especially the adults. But winning the youth championships had allowed me to "skip a grade," meaning I became eligible to compete in the eighteen-and-over category. There I was, a twelve-year-old competing against men in their twenties and thirties.

I felt the eyes of my challengers and supporters following me. I became aware through the chatter around me that some

observers thought I was too short to ever win a championship. I started to feel a pressure in my chest. *Everyone is watching me! I have to represent myself well*, I thought.

In the lead-up to the Games, we entered our most anxious phase. I felt increasing external pressure to represent my country proudly, and internal pressure to do my best. The world around me narrowed to nothing but the upcoming competition. Three days before the official start of the National Games, I was at the arena for the final qualifying round. Even though it was part of the preliminaries, I still had to take it seriously. That performance would prove to be a fateful one.

I stepped onto the carpet to start my saber form, competing alongside two other teammates. It was the largest audience I had ever performed for, with thousands of spectators, but I tuned out all the noise. And then, overtaken by adrenaline, one of my teammates accidentally swung his broadsword and sliced a big gash right in the side of my head. The funny thing was, I had no idea. I remember that my head felt very warm and wet, but I thought I was just sweating profusely. The more I jumped and kicked, the more I seemed to sweat. Droplets were running into my eyes and flying off me everywhere.

Hmm, I thought. *The arena must be very hot.*

Of course, the entire audience was roaring in horror, pointing and screaming, but I didn't hear anything. Because of our training, all three of us fighting had learned to let nothing stop us from finishing our event. The arena could have been on fire, and we would have completed our movements. So I kept going with my routine—punching, rolling, leaping. I didn't feel any pain, only heat around my head. Drip, drip, drip. That's all I knew. At one point, as I whipped my face around, I noticed some red drops. But I didn't stop doing my form.

From a very young age, I'd had it drilled into me that I could not let physical pain affect my performance. Not even a broken bone was an excuse. By that logic, a little blood was no reason at all to stop. My drive to continue performing was automatic: *I cannot stop. I must continue.* Years of inflexible training builds will, and when you're truly tested, it serves you well. On the other hand, if you are always allowed to stop training whenever you feel discomfort, you will find it too easy to give yourself permission to quit when things get tough.

So I finished my form, the three of us saluted, and we ran off the platform. Several of my female teammates were standing there off to the side, and they were all crying.

"What are you all sobbing about?" I asked them.

"Just look at yourself!" they cried. Somebody clapped a towel on my head. When I looked down, I saw that an entire half of my uniform was stained red with blood. I was soaked crimson from my shoulder down to my pant leg. When I saw all that blood, I let out a surprised little yelp and almost fainted.

They rushed me to the hospital, where I got stitched up. Then they took me back to the sports school to recuperate. The final round in the competition was coming up in three days. But the doctor had warned me that under no circumstances could the stitches be removed before a full week had passed. Although I was worried about whether I could compete, I was more worried about my mother finding out about the injury. She hadn't been at the qualifying round, but she was definitely planning to attend the final round, and when she saw my bandages, I knew she would panic. In the meantime, my elder brother heard about what had happened. He came over to the school, took one look at me lying in bed covered in blood, and immediately ran home to tell our mother: "Lianjie cut his head open!" My mother rushed over to the school. My coach had no

choice but to allow her to see me. Then he took my brother outside and punished him.

Somehow they managed to persuade my mother that I was okay to compete.

The day of the competition arrived. Before releasing me, the doctor asked, “Do you plan to keep your bandages on during your performance?”

No, I couldn’t do that—it would affect my balance.

“Do you want to forfeit the competition?”

Absolutely not!

So I wore my bandages all the way to the competition arena. When I arrived, everybody was watching me very carefully.

At the start of my performance, I walked up to the platform and ripped off the bandage. A nurse was standing by with disinfectant and a syringe.

She told me, “Immediately after you finish, come over here so I can clean your wound and cover it up again.” The cut on my head hadn’t healed yet, and they were all afraid that the exposure to sweat and dirt might get it infected.

At this point, the lessons I’d learned three years earlier from training on a broken ankle served me well. I focused deep down. The pain, the fear, the gaze from the audience’s eyes—they all faded away. Nothing existed except my form.

Then, as soon as I was done, I jumped off the platform, got an injection, and let the nurse sponge and rebandage my head.

When the judges announced the results, I had won the all-around championship.

My first-place win caused quite a sensation because I was so young. I was twelve years old, and the other two medalists were in their mid to late twenties. During the awards ceremony, as I stood on the top step of the podium, I was still shorter than the second- and third-place medalists. The audience, who

had witnessed my bloody performance and my tenacity, was stunned and delighted.

The national anthem began to play. As I stood there, listening, I began to feel overcome with emotion. I hadn't really realized the impact of winning a national title the year before, when I was eleven. This time, though, I suddenly wanted to cry.

I remember thinking, *This medal is for you, Mom! You didn't raise me in vain! Without your sacrifices, I couldn't have made it to this point!*

The events of the last few days—my injury, my mother's reaction, competing against the adults—all started swimming in the ocean of my mind, and my eyes filled with tears. There's nothing like winning something so big for the first time. I never cried again after a victory, but I certainly did that day. My performance that day feels like a symbol of my whole martial arts career: a young man in a trance, pushing himself to the limits of perfection without realizing he's bleeding from a gash in his head.

Everyone in our neighborhood was surprised that a local kid had won such a huge competition. Our apartment complex was buzzing with excitement, but my grandmother just sat there unfazed like, "See? I told you! I promised this child would bring the family fortune!" Finally, the family began to wonder if she had indeed been right all along.

After that, from 1975 to 1979, I won championship after championship. To combat the critique of my height and my limited knowledge of wushu forms, I took it upon myself to master all the eighteen arms: saber, spear, sword, halberd, axe, battle-axe, hook, fork, whip, mace, hammer, talon, trident-halberd, cudgel, long-handled spear, short cudgel, stick, and me-

teor hammer. This heroic effort was my way of proving my status as a champion beyond all doubt.

For my excellence in martial arts, the government began paying me a stipend of about \$15 per month. This may not sound like much today, but at that time people in China lived on about \$5 US per month, so my salary was astronomical. To put it in perspective, a senior engineer at that time made about \$15 per month. And if I traveled internationally to represent China in wushu demonstrations, I received an additional \$100 bonus.

For the first time in my life, I was flush. I bought my mother a Swiss watch, a true luxury item at that time. Eventually, I bought refrigerators, bicycles, washing machines, and TVs. Regular people didn't even have their own TV, let alone one in full color. I took great pride in providing for my family. My martial arts success led me to leave mainland China and travel to Hong Kong, then Europe, Africa, and even America as an ambassador of Chinese culture. I was beginning to make good on my grandmother's promise for my life.

And yet for all my early success, I was acutely aware that I didn't control the terms of my own life. I wasn't a good student because I enjoyed learning; I excelled because my family taught me to. I didn't do martial arts because I had a passion for it; I did it because the government expected me to, and my coach told me to. I was not my own boss. I don't mean *boss* just in the professional sense. I mean that all the happiness and meaning in my life was dependent on external sources: They called the moves, and I executed them.

We all have bosses in our lives. Yours might be your parents or caregivers, your teachers or coaches, your neighborhood, city, or country, your classmates and peers, or your online communities; they might be your fears for your children or

your desire for wealth, your reputation as a successful business owner or a tough fighter, your role as a peacemaker or a lone wolf, even your image as a bully or a failure. Whatever you make into your boss can feel solid and permanent, like a towering monolith that will never topple. But these bosses overshadow the truth of who we really are when all our names, roles, and wants are dismantled and exposed as illusory.

Even at a young age I sensed there was something within me that transcended not only every external expectation and condition, but also every permeable name or identity I might bear. Something that was inherently its own boss, that I could rely on completely. Later I would come to know this quality in myself as Buddha-nature (*Tathāgatagarbha* in Sanskrit), the capacity of every sentient being to awaken to the truth of their own nature as Buddha and go beyond life and death, beyond all the worldly ups and downs of gain and loss. Knowing this truth unshakably is the source of *zizai*.

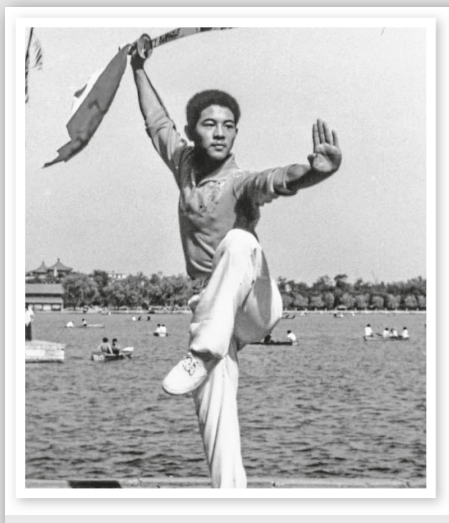
This is the deepest answer to the question “Who am I?” yet it requires training to embody. Much of the metaphorical imagery in the Buddha’s teachings about Buddha-nature speaks to the hidden yet innate quality of our true nature. He likens Buddha-nature to a vein of gold within ore requiring refinement to be revealed; or a statue covered in cloth whose perfection remains intact although it is concealed; or the sun obscured by clouds, always shining, yet temporarily blocked by ignorance and afflictions.

I sensed this precious quality but in childhood, I had no words for it. More important, I had no agency to call the shots. I relied on one set of adults or another, one institution or another. This was a very lonely way to live. Back then, all I could do was yearn for this inexpressible freedom. In the meantime, I lived my life in a constant chase, in which I was both the pur-

sued and the pursuer: Chased by fear of insecurity, I chased after greatness using the force of my own willpower. It was as if my mind were full of hooks, each one yanking me in a different direction: hooks of wealth, hooks of fame, hooks of love, hooks of fear. And as I would learn, the power of my will, unskillful and reckless, could lead to disastrous results.

CHAPTER 2

LIFE IS MOVEMENT





As I landed my wild kick on the wrong footing and heard the crisp pop of my tendons breaking, I didn't feel fear. I didn't feel anger or bitterness or shame.

I felt relief.

Starting in 1975, I won five consecutive championships in all-China martial arts competitions. After my victories, I felt I no longer needed to prove myself as a martial arts practitioner. I wanted to move on to my next adventure. I wanted to be a movie star. My mind set rigidly, I couldn't see beyond my desire.

My martial arts success had allowed me to travel internationally, and the team always stopped in Hong Kong on the way from China to other more far-flung destinations. At that time, Hong Kong was the center of the world when it came to martial arts film production. Always on the lookout for the next star, producers from the film industry would attend my team's martial arts demonstrations. From the first time they saw me, they encouraged me to dream of appearing in a film. "Eat a lot of food so you can grow up fast!" they joked.

It was also in Hong Kong that I saw my first Bruce Lee film, *Fist of Fury*. I remember watching with rapt attention, captivated by Lee's huge image, the agility of his movements, the thundering volume of the strikes as his fists and feet made contact with his opponents. I wanted to be the next Bruce Lee. Then I could take care of my family, and I would have enough money to be safe.

In 1980, a film company invited me to play the leading role of Jue Yuan, the young Shaolin monk in the film *Shaolin Temple*. I felt that this invitation confirmed my achievement and acknowledged I had graduated out of competitive martial arts. Before that, I had worked hard to be chosen to appear in a film. At first I'd been passed over for roles because of my height. My wushu team leader even told me, "You're so short, don't even think about making a movie!" Then a studio in Hong Kong put together a script for me based on the beloved comic book character Sanmao, a young boy living in poverty during the Second World War. But my life still belonged to the government, and they wouldn't give their permission.

The government finally agreed to let me appear in *Shaolin Temple*, which it saw as an opportunity to promote Chinese wushu. To be selected as an actor was very rare, but I felt I had earned it with my strong abilities and my natural gift for performing.

I loved the process of shooting *Shaolin Temple*. At that time, there were no action choreographers. Instead, the director told us the basic story of a scene beforehand. Then we took what we had learned in our martial arts training and designed our own fight scenes. When we had our routine worked out, we'd demonstrate it for the director. He'd give us his notes: "In this scene you have the advantage—show that more," or "Your character needs to be more vulnerable here. Make the villain stronger." And we'd go back to tinker and refine the scene. We'd come to the director for more feedback, then go back and change it again. It wasn't the most efficient process, but we had no idea how movies were made! This way, however, before we even began shooting, we'd already choreographed every one of our fight scenes. It was thrilling to create our own action se-

quences, and when the director used some piece of my own personality in my character, that was a genuine pleasure.

But that wasn't even the best part. The best part was that I didn't have to train anymore! Goodbye to six days a week, eight hours a day, of backbreaking repetitive mandatory drills and practice. A competitive martial artist is under a huge amount of pressure. You train all year round; then you have only one chance to make the right move in a competition. If you mess up, you squander an entire year's worth of work in two minutes. The pressure is unbearable; the margin of error is narrow. But on a movie set, if you get a movement wrong, you cut and do it again, take after take. While we were filming, my martial arts skills were an asset, but I no longer felt my entire future was riding on how well I executed a single movement. On set, I could finally breathe after all those years of grueling training.

Compared to the gauntlet of training we had gone through in the past few years, making a movie was like a leisurely vacation. Even though we woke up at five or six a.m. to get to the set and shot from eight a.m. until sunset, that was nothing. It was even relaxing. Yes, we had to fight all day in front of the camera, but it was nowhere near as exhausting as a wushu class. There must have been thirty or forty of us young people, and we had bottomless reserves of energy. After we finished the day's shoot, we'd still go out again in the evening and play soccer or basketball. We bounced around the set, our shaved heads like a gaggle of rubber balls.

After the filming was completed, the company was happy with the project and believed it would become a success. A representative from the company told me: "In the future, you can just make movies! There's no need for you to go back to being an athlete."

I thought, *I'm a movie actor now! I'm Jue Yuan! I'm going to be a famous film actor with a new name. A new exciting life is spreading out in front of me, and I've taken the first steps. I'm no longer Li Lianjie the athlete, who depended on state sponsorship for his every need, who couldn't make any decisions without the team's approval.*

However, reality didn't go according to my fantasy. Before *Shaolin Temple* was released in 1981, my martial arts coach told me, "We have an event coming up. You're the center of the team. You need to come back and do something exciting for the demonstration."

It turned out the showcase was only a month away. I was shocked. *But I'm Jue Yuan!* In my mind, I'd already left all that behind: the eight-hour days of training, the pressure to be the best, the rigorous touring schedule. I wanted my life as an athlete to be in the past. Instead, I felt dizzy, straddling two conflicting identities, torn between the glory of the future and the suffering of the past. I was afraid that I'd get pulled back into competition and become stuck there forever, unable to form a new identity. In the process, I lost the present.

Because *Shaolin Temple* involved scenes from all four seasons, the filming process took ten months over the course of two years. That meant I had gone two whole years without training. Full of pride, I balked at the idea of competing when I was not in perfect shape and worried I would be defeated badly.

I called the film company and said, "You told me I can just make movies, but now they're calling me up for another competition. Can you help me?"

But they refused.

I begged my coaches to let me sit out the competition. They reassured me that I would only have to be part of the demon-

stration, but this, too, was impossible in my eyes.

Seething with frustration, I felt outraged that no one saw it my way.

At first it was fun to practice with my old teammates. I was a hero to them now because I'd been in a movie. However, I saw immediately how out of shape I was. I would have to cram in all the practice I could to keep up.

Then, two weeks before the competition, the coaches called me in. They told me, "Looks like you'll have to compete after all."

Every cell in my body was protesting! My mind made a frenzied outcry of all its objections: *It's not fair! They told me I didn't need to compete! I've already proved my abilities!*

I expressed my resistance to the team leader, but he told me, "It doesn't matter if you lose your matches. You still have a strong foundation, and you're still stronger than a lot of other competitors. Your score will be high. Just help the team get points."

When I was younger, I was very strong-willed and single-minded. I used my physical strength to gain a sense of control. If I entered a competition, I was there to win.

If I lose, I'll look like a fool! I thought.

I'd worked so hard to be a winner, and now I would lose my reputation. But at that time, I still belonged to China. My country had sponsored me and trained me and supported me, and I had no right to say no. I felt betrayed by the film production company, by my team leader, and by my fate. Still, I had no choice but to go back and train for the competition.

Now that I had returned to compete again, I felt my new role as a film actor and my new name of Jue Yuan slipping away. I slid back into Li Lianjie, the competitive athlete who asked himself, *How can I just get points?* I didn't have enough

space in my narrow view to hold both my old identity and my new one at the same time. I could see only in black and white: *If I get what I want, I'll be happy. If I don't, I'll die.* My desires had their hooks in me, and I couldn't imagine I could lose the competition and still have the future I wanted.

At that time, I lacked a coherent philosophy to guide my life. As a result, I was buffeted by my fears and desires, constantly hooked and limited in my freedom, longing for peace but unsure where to find it. My life as a wushu practitioner was suffused with the principles of tai chi, one of the martial expressions of Taoism that emphasized harmony, adaptability, and working with opposing yet complementary forces. However, I sensed that there must be something beyond the polarities of yin and yang. If you have no access to find a place of inner peace, you'll always be tugged by the ceaseless interplay of opposites, caught in the whirlwind of black and white.

I knew this state only as a distant intuition. In Taoism, this something beyond is called *wuji*, meaning “limitless” or “without a pole.” I'd heard about it, but I had no idea how to embody it. The truth is that I learned Taoism at such a young age, while I was hooked and driven by so many other concerns, that I never really had the capacity to understand or internalize it. It would take a lifetime to integrate the spiritual introduction of my youth into my later experience.

In the meantime, the competition rushed toward me. During the day, I practiced with the team, and at night, I practiced on my own. But I was physically exhausted, and I couldn't bear the load. My mind raced to find an out. Then I remembered: I'd seen teammates removed from competitions due to physical injury. I'd even been released from the obligation to participate myself years earlier when I broke my ankle. If I broke my leg or had another serious injury, no one could force

me to compete, and then I wouldn't have to win or be humiliated.

This thought became my obsession, an escape I cherished in my heart. It grew to become a barrier to all my other thoughts. I went to sleep pondering and woke up contemplating. I nursed it diligently and became dead set on my plan: to retire from martial arts permanently due to injury. To become a film actor full time and leave the athlete behind. My mind labored to achieve this fixed outcome, crafting its master plan. I considered every detail. *What part of my body should I damage? How will I carry out the injury? Which hospital should I go to?* I researched different injury wards and carefully selected the perfect one, a special hospital only for athletes.

After three days obsessing over my grand plan, I came to practice one morning and trained until 11:45 a.m. Then I decided to wrap and walked off the court. As I was leaving, one of the coaches asked me in a sarcastic tone: "There are still fifteen minutes left, you don't want to practice? This is how you're going to win the championship?"

I was furious. I walked with determination straight back into the gym. Riding the energy of my anger and the desperate hope of escape, I launched into a highly complex maneuver. While holding a spear, I took a running start, jumped into the air, spun 360 degrees, landed, then leapt up again into a whirling tornado kick, and landed in a full split. I had executed this sequence flawlessly dozens of times, but this time when I landed, the angle was wrong: my center of gravity was off, and I had used too much force. My coordination was clouded by my emotions. I heard the pop, and then I collapsed on the ground.

"My leg is broken!" I shouted. I didn't even care about the pain in my body. I was flooded with a sense of relief and, even

though I was lying on the ground with a broken leg, I felt a little happy.

From the sidelines, the coach kept up his sarcastic tone: “Oh, you’re a big actor now? Stop pretending! When class is over, you can leave.”

But another coach saw something was wrong and hurried toward me. He made a quick exam of my body, found that I couldn’t move, and arranged for me to be taken to the hospital. But which hospital? Not the one I’d planned on! I protested that I wanted to go to the other hospital, but they didn’t listen. At the first hospital, they took X-rays and determined that I was fine. When I came back to the gym, the coach kept teasing me: “Quit being so dramatic! This isn’t the movies.” I begged the other coach to take me to another hospital, the one I’d planned on in my scheme, for a second opinion. He finally agreed, and the doctor there examined my leg and announced I would need emergency surgery.

I was in surgery for seven hours. Afterward, I learned that two tendons in my right leg had snapped and that the bones were shattered. I didn’t feel nervous or frightened. This was what I wanted: to cast off my old self and be free to shine brightly with my new one. To be the movie star, not the poor boy who was forced to compete in martial arts to provide for his family, who practiced eight hours a day like a prisoner.

The day after the operation, I asked my doctor how my treatment was progressing. He explained, “The plaster will be on for eight weeks, and then it will take another four weeks after it’s removed for you to heal fully.”

“So this means I don’t have to compete anymore, right?” I asked, giddy with the success of my plan.

The doctor looked at me in disbelief. “What are you talking about? Compete? You can’t even be an athlete now.”

I was thrilled. I had the answer I was looking for. “So I can just focus on making movies now?”

Again, he looked confused. “You can never make another movie. You’ll be lucky to walk again. You’re now a degree-three disabled person. You qualify for lifetime subsidies from the government.”

Now I did start to get nervous. Never make another movie? Could there be such a terrible waste of a life? I felt nauseous and spiraled into terrible, unrelenting anxiety. Later, when the doctor came back, I asked him in a quavering voice: “When you said before that I couldn’t make another movie, what did you mean?”

“Well, with an injury like this, you could easily get injured again. The tendons are currently reattached, but they may snap again. If they snap again, they’ll have to be reattached again. But the next time it might not be possible to reattach them. If that happens, you’ll have to use a wheelchair.”

I stayed in the hospital for about two months. A month into my recovery, someone from the film company brought a VHS to my room. I looked at the label and was excited to see it was *Shaolin Temple*! One of the nurses wheeled a TV with a VCR into my room to screen the movie. My room could hold only about ten people, but I remember there being at least twenty people—doctors, nurses, other patients—crammed into the room to watch my cinematic debut. When the movie ended, the audience cheered with excitement. This was the first time I realized the movie would be a giant success. As I watched the others celebrating and sharing joy about the film, I felt sickened by my mistake: There would be no more movies. I had destroyed my chances to be an actor. I was going from one form of dependence on the state—competitive athlete—to another—

disability payments. I lay on my hospital bed, staring at the ceiling in despair.

When I was released from the hospital, I couldn't bend my leg at all. It just stuck out straight like my leg was concrete and there was steel rebar inside. Everywhere I went, I dragged my rigid leg around with me. At that time, Chinese bathrooms rarely had a modern toilet. Usually, there was just a hole in the ground to squat over. Because I couldn't bend my leg, I had to press my arms against the walls of the stall and balance myself with my left leg bent and my right leg sticking straight out, straining to hold this position. Basically, I had to do parkour just to poop.

Not only was I suffering, but I also had to conceal my hobbled leg. When the film producers found out about my injury, they told me, "No one can know about this! Don't let anyone know you're hurt." I had to do the entire press tour for *Shaolin Temple* pretending my leg worked fine so that everyone could get excited about what movie I'd make next. Only a few knew the disheartening truth.

Prosperity and depression hit me at the same time. *Shaolin Temple* was a huge success in mainland China. Everywhere I went, people bragged, "He's my friend! He's my schoolmate! He lives in my building!" Everybody wanted a piece of me. But because the doctors had told me I could never film again, my troubled heart could not settle. Looking to console me, my friend made an appointment to take me on an outing to a secluded place: Tanzhe Temple, an ancient Buddhist site over an hour west from downtown Beijing. I stayed there for a few days, and it became a refuge for me. Whereas back in Beijing, I was mobbed by fans and adjusting uneasily to my newfound fame, here in the quiet and elegance of the temple, I felt at peace. Every morning, I dragged my injured leg to the main

hall to watch the monks in the temple doing morning prayers and meditation. I felt tranquility. I had found a safe and comfortable corner of a temple to rest in while I contemplated my life and considered how to move forward. I had no intention at the time of becoming a devout Buddhist disciple, but I was deeply grateful for the spiritual shelter that had welcomed me.

The recovery process from my injury was laborious. At that time in China, there was really no physical therapy or rehab, the kind they have today for professional athletes. I had to treat my injuries on my own, slowly regaining mobility. Of course, in the end, I was able to regain enough movement to continue making movies for decades. Ultimately, I got back about 30 to 40 percent of the use of my right knee. Thereafter, I filmed every movie with a knee at 30 percent of its full range of motion. Because of my obsession with my new role and new identity, and my clinging to my short-term desire of avoiding the competition, I had to wrap my knee in a special brace every time I filmed a movie. Because of the rigidity of my will, I was burdened with rigidity in my knee for the rest of my life. Every single movie I made required me to use huge amounts of willpower to overcome the chronic pain in my leg. Sometimes I wonder what I might have been able to achieve with a knee at 100 percent.

One of the fundamental truths observed by the Buddha is impermanence (*anitya* in Sanskrit). Put simply, impermanence means that everything is changing. The heat of the summer cools into the crispness of fall, which descends to the chill of winter, which thaws into the warm breeze of spring. Then the cycle repeats again, on and on, always turning like the white and black circles of the taijitu. Life is movement.

However, when we are unable to accept impermanence at work in our lives or we fight against it, we suffer. The Buddha

taught that suffering (*dukkha* in Sanskrit) is the result of two factors: *tanha* (craving, literally “thirst”), and *upadana* (clinging, grasping, literally “fuel”). When I first desperately wanted to get out of the competition, I believed my emotions of pride and anger would last forever. This delusion caused a craving to form in me to escape the competition. This terrible thirst is *tanha*. In our lives we may experience all kinds of desires, but only some of them escalate to the fever pitch of intensity that becomes thirst. The Buddha evoked the image of a massive fire with dozens of cartloads of timber burning. Clinging to a desire is like heaping dried grass, dried cow dung, and dried timber on the fire until it erupts into a massive blaze for a long, long time. All my ruminations on how to escape the competition and which hospital to go to, the bitterness of being betrayed by my coaches and the film producers—all this attachment to my views and preferences was like fuel heaped on the fire until it became a terrible blaze inside me that took over my entire being. This is *upadana*.

Recalling the incident of my knee injury now, I wonder why I tormented myself so badly back then. I wanted so passionately to be a movie star that I forgot I was just the lead in the movie of a life called Jet Li. Why should everything be so serious? Yes, I was forced to go back to a competition just when my fame was taking off. Yes, I was out of shape and probably wouldn’t have won. But if I’m meant to lose, so I lose. Is it really such a big deal? No one would even remember the result of that one last championship. In all likelihood, it would quickly fade from memory. And why couldn’t I help my team get some points? It took me many years to learn how to be part of a greater whole, how to serve others, and how to be okay with what was happening, without judging, clinging, or fighting it.

Today I see my youthful impulsiveness in a new perspective. Every time I wrap my knee, I remember again my narrow-mindedness and attachment to the way I wanted things to be. When I gave into my anger and executed that impossible kick, I had no conception of the long life stretching out ahead of me. I could not even imagine the pain of a chronic injury, the threat of losing my film career, the inconvenience of having to protect my leg in a brace before every shot, the regret of my adult self for my youthful ignorance. I had not lived long enough to experience the inevitable ups and downs that teach us to be okay with being okay, and okay with not being okay. If only I could have seen my life from the vantage point of my future, I might have been more patient. The bandage itself became a kind of alarm to remember the truth of impermanence and the wisdom of a broader perspective. Now, after years of practice, I would not sacrifice my health for the illusion of a new future, no matter how exciting.

When I began meditating in earnest, I began to see the workings of impermanence in my own mind up close. Sitting with my desires and examining them, I discovered I could watch the desire for something to happen, or the desire for something not to happen, without acting. When the mind is very quiet, it is possible to witness the entire lifespan of a desire, from its birth in the mind, rising to its peak, to its diminution and disappearance. I've sat in silent meditation facing desires that burned in my body and that persuaded my mind that I would die if I didn't act them out, only to watch them dissolve as my mind moved onto the next one. Over time, my body, mind, and heart learned that I could be okay whether my desire was fulfilled or not. In the end, it would always pass. This is the cloudlike freedom of *zizai*. If we can remember in the

moment that a desire is impermanent, it is much easier to withstand it.

And yet, I still struggle with stubbornness. There are times when life doesn't go my way, and that hotheaded young man comes back with a vengeance and wants to execute a reckless flying kick to gain control of the uncontrollable. Usually I'm able to sit with him in silence until he regains his equilibrium.

• • •

ANOTHER ASPECT OF TAOIST WISDOM emphasizes the paramount importance of perspective. The ceaseless flow of yin and yang has no permanent characteristics we can label. Instead, how we see things depends on the angle from which we're seeing them. Are we standing on the black side, looking at the white, or the opposite? What phase is the movement in? Because our perspective is always shifting, the world we live in is always shifting along with it.

I remember the shift in perspective I experienced when I first traveled to America. Back in 1974, I was chosen to be part of a special training course for the finest young wushu athletes in the country. Our first major assignment was to represent China (and her 20 million wushu practitioners) on a goodwill tour of the United States. This was a very significant visit. Relations between China and the United States were uncertain at that time, in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. All my life, I'd been taught to be suspicious of America: "Americans are enemies of the revolution! Western countries are decadent societies! Capitalism is the ideology of evil!" So as our visit to the West approached, I was both nervous and defiantly proud: I wanted to show America the power, nobility, and discipline of Chinese culture.

In preparation for our trip, we were put through an astonishingly detailed training course. And I don't mean just wushu training. This was an even more delicate discipline: Western social etiquette. Meals would be carefully coursed out. Not only were we taught how to eat with a knife and fork instead of chopsticks, but we had to know which knife and fork were used for each course. Each plate would be flanked by an army of utensils. This knife was for spreading butter, while this one was for removing bones from fish. Later, in my film *Once Upon a Time in China*, we made a joke about this. When the Chinese characters enter a Western-style dining room, one of them asks, "Why are there so many swords and daggers on the table?" Beyond the proper uses of cutlery, there were all the little social graces: Don't let the knife touch the plate; don't show your teeth while chewing; and never ever use a toothpick in an undignified manner! I truly believed that if I made a single mistake, the motherland would lose face internationally and my future would be over.

Our teachers also instructed us on proper demeanor and conduct during air travel: how to board the plane in an orderly line, how to sit quietly during the flight. We learned the proper protocol for answering the phone in English, how to listen courteously and respond when an American asked us a question, how to behave when surrounded by curious crowds. The whole ordeal took half a year!

When the classes came to an end at last, we were thrilled and relieved. We were ready to set off on our goodwill tour, visiting four cities in America: Honolulu, San Francisco, New York, and Washington, DC. I remember our arrival in Hawaii and the sensation of setting foot on American soil for the first time. It felt like a strange and frightening place from a story. I never imagined I'd actually visit the United States, or that mar-

tial arts would be my passport to the wider world. The beliefs I carried about life outside of China were starting to crumble.

Although our tour was made in the spirit of goodwill, there was a lot of wariness on both sides. Nobody knew what might happen to us mainland Chinese in the United States, so our group became a high-security enterprise. When we got to America, we were assigned bodyguards from the US Department of State. In addition, a massive American police presence followed us everywhere we went, including various FBI and CIA agents depending on the jurisdiction of our destination. Patrol cars escorted us in long motorcades, and hundreds of uniformed officers kept the wide-eyed public away from us.

Up until that point, I'd been a very obedient and well-behaved kid. But my martial arts training had started to make me more confident. More confident meant more playful, and that meant more mischievous. Cheeky, even. After being away from the rules of home for almost a month, I was getting bolder and bolder about satisfying my own curiosity in this strange place. I was fascinated by the guns our bodyguards carried. Although the guards were officially discouraged from speaking with us, I kept pestering them about the guns.

"Can I see it up close? Can I maybe hold it?"

Because we were thrown together by our circumstances for so many hours at a time, my bodyguard and I had formed an unusual sort of friendship. I started to play a game with him that I thought was hilarious. Because I was short for my age, I came up only to the middle of his torso. Since we were always together, I'd gotten into the habit of holding on to his shirt as we walked. He'd walk in front, and I'd tag behind. This position gave me perfect access to his belt, which was where he kept his holster.

“Oh, cool!” I’d say, and reach out to touch the gun, feeling his whole body tense up. I probably did that at least once a day for weeks. To his credit, my bodyguard took it all in stride. You could say this was my first experience of the thawing of Sino-US relations.

My assumptions about American life truly exploded in the dining room. Mercilessly drilled on our table manners, we were prepared to be impeccable guests. But when we actually began eating with Americans, we were stunned. For our large gatherings, the food was served buffet style. All the dishes were prepared in advance and sat on long tables. You were expected to pick up a tray, take a plate, and move along the table; whatever you wanted to eat, you grabbed as much as you wanted. Then you carried your tray back to your table and could start eating right away—in any order you wanted.

I remember the first time I ate like that. Instead of the decorous silence I expected, I heard the loud clatter and hubbub of eating all around me. I looked to my left: People were slamming their trays down and sitting with their legs propped up. I looked to the right: Even my bodyguard wasn’t using his utensils properly. He was grabbing a piece of chicken with his hands and chomping away. He didn’t even cut the meat! He just tore into it with his mouth wide open while I stared dumbly, my own mouth hanging open in awe. This was American eating. Everywhere I looked, people were slurping, chewing, talking, and misusing their spoons. All the rules were being violated—and nobody cared!

After all that rigorous training, we didn’t know how to eat like Americans at all. I learned later that the system of etiquette we had been taught came straight from Buckingham Palace. We had been prepared to eat as if we were dining with the British royal family. I started to understand that everything

we'd been taught did not necessarily apply to the real life of another society. My perspective was blown open.

The longer we stayed in America, the more I noticed how different everything was from China—and not all in a bad way.

Wow! I thought. There are so many cars here. Hey, look how tall those buildings are! Check it out—Americans have swimming pools in their backyards! In China, we have only one flavor of ice cream, but in America they have ten!

None of us dared to say the forbidden words—“Hey, it’s nice here!”—but everyone was thinking it. The truth of taiji hit home for me. China was not completely good; America was not completely bad. In the yin-yang of China and America, the circle of each country contained a dot of its opposite. I was learning the impermanent nature of fixed beliefs and the profound difference between theory and practice. This was also the beginning for me of a global perspective, a sense of connection with all humanity, regardless of national borders or cultural differences.

Life is constantly reminding us of its motion. It may be in a significant event—a birth, a death, or someone’s graduation—or in a quieter moment, like noticing the first green shoots of spring after a winter thaw. We may catch change in the act, but often we don’t realize it has happened until its effects are undeniable. The motion may appear dizzying. Within our lives, thoughts, sensations, emotions, and entire chapters arise and pass. Impermanence reigns over our perspectives as well. We may see ourselves, our relationships, even whole countries and cultures, one way, only to shift position and discover a radically different angle.

If we fight the movement of life and death, scrambling to slow down its ceaseless and inevitable cycles, we suffer. If we deny it, believing like I did that our feelings and circumstances

will last forever, it will rudely snap us out of our trance. When we misperceive our reality to be permanent, change may become a source of grief and even nihilism. But when impermanence is accepted, we recognize that it is the source of the beauty in our lives. Moments are important and deserve our attention by the very fact that they are brief. Impermanence gives us our opportunity to meet life and see the preciousness in its rare and fleeting duration.

My vehicle to break out of the narrow confines of my life as a professional athlete was martial arts. But I still hadn't grasped its deepest teachings of non-harming and, most important, the interconnectedness of all beings. To learn to embody those deeper values, I had to continue to struggle in a new system: the film industry. And I had to devote myself to a new art form: storytelling.

CHAPTER 3

THE SECRET TO SELF-DEFENSE





Within a few years of my film debut, I was a movie star across the Asian world. The impetus of my fears and desires had pushed me closer to the top of the heap, yet my success brought me all kinds of new problems I'd never imagined. I starred in a successful sequel to *Shaolin Temple* and then another. To be honest, I didn't want to make a third Shaolin Temple movie, but for various professional and contractual reasons, I had to. And the experience making the third Shaolin film in 1985 forced me to confront a whole new level of professional conflict.

On the first two films, everyone in the cast and crew had been from mainland China. But for the new movie, the studio brought in a big Hong Kong director with his team, and even a group of stunt doubles from the Hong Kong film scene to be in the shoot. We started to notice discrepancies in how the production treated us mainlanders as opposed to the pros from Hong Kong.

For example, on *Shaolin Temple*, all of us were paid 1 yuan a day. On *Kids from Shaolin*, the cast and crew got 2 yuan a day. On the new movie, we were going to make 3 yuan a day. On those first two films, I didn't think too much about it: I didn't have a clear concept of money, and I was used to relying on the state, which tended to treat everyone equally. At least that's what I perceived back then. But by the third movie, I had started to notice the inequality pervasive in the world. It became clear that some of these Hong Kong stunt guys were mak-

ing 15,000 yuan a month on the shoot. Now, as the lead actor, I was doing most of the fighting and acting on camera from morning until night, while they mostly stood in the back waving their swords and yelling. They didn't have to express any emotional nuance or growth or complexity. I was carrying this movie on my back, so why were they earning so much more than I was?

When everyone is earning the same amount of money—if the lead and the lowest extra are both earning 1 yuan a day—there isn't much anyone can do because we're all working within that system. But when two systems are in collision, the inequity can be divisive. And it wasn't just about money. The crews were even served different food. We mainlanders ate our simple lunches from Styrofoam lunch boxes, while the Hong Kong crew were provided with specially catered rich and expensive Cantonese food. I remember sitting with my humble lunch staring with indignation at their heaping trays.

In a commercial society, this kind of stratification is common and even expected. In Hollywood, the measure of an actor's stardom is the size of their trailer. But when the discrimination is based on where you're from, you feel another kind of outrage. We were working so hard for next to nothing, just because we were from mainland China and not Hong Kong. The contradictions started to pile up in my heart as I realized that others perceived us and our work as less valuable. The studio was expecting me to sell their movie, but they weren't treating me with the most fundamental respect. It defied all logic. I felt an inner backlash setting in and started to develop a resentment against the work itself.

As a result of these conditions, my heart wasn't in the actual filmmaking. Instead of devoting myself moment by moment to the act of making the movie, I was constantly judging and ana-

lyzing the circumstances under which the movie was being made. I believed that becoming a film star would make me feel safe and secure enough that I could be at peace. Yet now, as a film star, I discovered my freedom was still limited. I went from being an employee of the government as a martial artist to being an employee of the film industry as a performer. My life was still dependent on powerful external structures, and my mind was still dominated by my desires for personal wealth, pleasure, and safety. I didn't see myself as part of the whole world. Instead, I felt I was on my own, working incessantly to make it give me what I wanted.

The double standard on set came to a head with an incident involving a four a.m. shot. At that time, we didn't have the technology to render the lighting of a scene artificially. This meant that scenes set at sunrise and sunset were the most difficult shots to film because the window of opportunity is so limited. If you're a minute or so too late, the light changes, and it's not what you need. To capture that brief window of light, the crew has to start preparing several hours ahead of time. All of us had to wake up at two a.m. to get to our location on time and set up the equipment. As daybreak approached, we looked around and got very anxious: The director was nowhere in sight.

We waited.

The first light of morning came and went.

We waited until ten a.m.

That's when the director finally showed up. His first words were: "Aiya! The light's all wrong! Weren't we planning a sunrise shot? Oh well, guess we can't do anything about it now. Let's wrap for the day."

I was fuming. I felt like we were being toyed with. Here was this big-shot director flexing his power, playing mind games

with us. We had helplessly waited eight hours, at the mercy of his will. And the whole exercise had been completely unnecessary.

After that, I went to great lengths to track down the producer and let my rage boil over: “I may not know much about making movies. I’ve only made two, and I’m very young. But can I ask you a simple question? The shot list called for a scene to be shot at daybreak, so we were ready at three a.m. We waited for seven hours, and then the director showed up at ten a.m. and said the light’s all wrong. Is he wrong, or am I? See, I really don’t understand much about filmmaking, and I’d like to learn more. If you say I’m wrong, then I promise to go back home right now and never make another movie. But if you think the director’s the one who needs to learn something about filmmaking, then maybe you agree that he owes the entire cast and crew an apology.”

He looked at me like I was a baby learning to speak its first words.

After that shoot, I was totally soured on filmmaking. I was an angry young man, and my views on society had become cynical. I felt everyone was trying to take advantage of those with less power. I decided to leave the movie business flat out. When I informed the film company of my decision, they responded, “If you don’t like the process, why don’t you direct your own film?” This wouldn’t be the last time in my life that I tried to renounce movies and they pulled me back in.

I poured all my anger about my experience on my previous film and about the social inequalities I’d witnessed into my directorial debut, *Born to Defense*. Because of the censorship at the time, I couldn’t depict actual contemporary incidents of discrimination. Instead, I couched my story in a historical episode from the end of the Second World War. I used the poor

treatment of Chinese soldiers returning home after driving the Japanese from our soil as an allegory for the poor treatment of mainlanders in the late seventies and early eighties. I wanted people to feel the bitterness of a warped society in which the star of *Shaolin Temple* was forced to eat from a Styrofoam lunch box while a bit player from Hong Kong feasted on specially catered food! I'll be honest, I don't think I was a successful director. This was 1986. I was about twenty-three. I couldn't get my audience to achieve my frame of mind. And I couldn't see beyond my own personal suffering to address the vast suffering of other beings who were also stuck in pain. I decided to direct my energies back into acting.

After a break from filmmaking to cool off, I started making movies in Hong Kong. By 1991, when my breakout film *Once Upon a Time in China* was released, I was one of the Hong Kong pros making thousands of yuan a month and eating special food. The white dot at the bottom of the ying-yang had become the white circle at the top. Life is movement. By 1993, I had my own production company. Now I could exercise control over the entire process. I chose the stories I wanted to tell and the crew I wanted to work with. I pushed myself creatively, involving myself in the script, the fight scenes, the story, and the philosophy. Together, we produced several successful films according to my own vision: *Tai Chi Master*, *Fong Sai-Yuk* I and II, *The Bodyguard from Beijing*, and *Fist of Legend*. These are the only five films I own outright, a rare circumstance for most actors or producers, and are a testament to my hunger for true independence.

Slowly, storytelling enabled me to bridge martial arts and philosophy. One of my great teachers in this was the director and fight choreographer Yuen Woo-ping, whom I first worked with on *Once Upon a Time in China*. He taught me to focus on

expressing the growth and development of my characters through my martial arts and acting. When this is done, the martial arts sequences become more than just spectacle—they become an integral part of the storytelling. He emphasized that a character’s journey should be reflected not just in the events of the plot, but also in the way they move and fight. Characters might start with raw, unrefined techniques and gradually evolve to display more precision, control, and emotional depth as they grow throughout the film.

In the final sequence of *Tai Chi Master*, for example, the protagonist Jun Bao confronts his childhood friend Tian Bao. As boys, they were Shaolin monks together, but now Tian Bao has become a power-hungry warlord, murdering their friends on his way to the top rank of the army. In his grief over Tian Bao’s betrayal, Jun Bao loses his mind and discovers taijiquan (tai chi), the radical style of martial arts rooted in Taoism that takes its inspiration from the continuous fluidity of yin and yang.

As we filmed their showdown, I sometimes slipped back into flashy and aggressive techniques. Woo-ping would stop me and say, “No! Think of what this fight *means* to your character. He’s fighting his best friend who betrayed him. He wants to fight, and he doesn’t want to fight. They fought a thousand times as boys, and Tian Bao was always stronger. Now they’re fighting as men. Tian Bao still fights like a young man—cruel and sharp. But Jun Bao understands he’s part of nature itself. How does he move? What are the rhythms of yin with yang? How does soft defeat hard?”

Woo-ping encouraged me to use martial arts as a tool to showcase the character’s inner transformation. This meant that the fighting style, intensity, and even the cadence of the

action sequences should align with the character's emotional and psychological arc.

Storytelling itself contains a template for the growth and maturity of a human life. In my view, you can boil down the inner journey of the hero in countless martial arts films to this: a dawning realization that, where he believed he was separate from the rest of life, he is in fact an integral part of it. The Buddha taught that all phenomena arise in dependence on causes and conditions. This is the principle of interdependence (*pratītyasamutpāda* in Sanskrit). Nothing exists in isolation; everything is interconnected. At its best, martial arts training can guide a practitioner to respect the truth of this interlocking chain of beings. Most of us start off with no conception of our place in the fabric of life. We are proud and arrogant warriors eager to show off our own strength regardless of the consequences. But in time, we can evolve into mature guardians of life, using our skill and power to prevent harm and cultivate wisdom.

I see the spiritual evolution of a martial artist in three stages. In the first stage, I have a sword in my hand and a sword in my heart; in the second, I have no sword in my hand, but still a sword in my heart; and in the third, I have no sword in my hand, no sword in my heart. During the first stage, human skill is at its peak. This is the integration of the fighter with their weapon. The fighter's skill is so perfect that there's no difference between the fighter's arm and the sword because the movements are made with such grace. Even at this stage, it is possible to refrain from killing. When a fighter's skill is good enough, they can end the battle before dealing death. Still, fighters can use their weapons only to beat someone's body; they can never use it to change the other person's heart. If the challengers on either side of a conflict never evolve to the next

stage, the first stage can continue for thousands of years. Feeling wounded and bitter, one generation will teach their children to take revenge on the other side, who will in turn react with their own woundedness and bitterness and pass it down to their children.

In the second stage, the sword is not in the hand, but it's still in the heart. While the warrior is not using the sword to attack, inside they're still angry. In this stage, the fighter stands strong, and others perceive their strength. Imagine a country with a huge store of arms—missiles and bombs, tanks and soldiers. Everyone knows that if they were to attack this country, they would be damaged in turn. This is the stage of diplomacy. Instead of fighting with weapons, they fight with rhetoric. This is also the stage of protection. People protect their own people and their beliefs. Many diplomats in the United Nations try to do this; sometimes they are successful, sometimes they aren't. As we read in the news every day, this is no true peace.

In the third stage, there's no sword in the hand and no sword in the heart. This is the stage of compassion and universal love. If you love everyone, there is no offense or defense. As it says in the Christian adage, "If you slap me on the cheek, I will offer you the other side." In the third stage, the martial artist trains the body and mind not for aggression, but to dissolve violence—whether the external violence of physical combat or the internal violence of anger and self-centeredness. In this way, the third stage reflects the deeper meaning behind the term *wushu*. The term has two characters: *wu* and *shu*. *Wu* is a compound character that contains the meanings "to stop" and "weapon." *Shu* is the character for skill. Put together, their meaning becomes "to use martial skill to stop violence." That is the true skill of wushu and the compassionate expression of the warrior's awareness that they are connected to all of life.

The ideal of the third stage is expressed in the Buddhist notion of a bodhisattva, an individual committed to attaining Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings, like Manjushri, to whom my grandmother prayed. When I formally took the bodhisattva vow, I pledged my boundless determination to seek freedom beyond life and death and work tirelessly to end suffering in all forms. Thus, the ideals of both wushu and the bodhisattva path teach that true strength lies in overcoming conflict rather than perpetuating it. When we aspire to embody the wisdom of the third stage, our commitment transforms our interactions with others. Those who love us are inspired, and those who are hostile toward us soften. This stage takes a lot of practice and requires good teachers who will point out when you have picked up the sword again.

For years, people have asked me, “Jet, what is the secret to self-defense?” My answer often surprises people: a smile. The smile is emblematic of the third stage of martial arts, over a three-stage process: If you consistently meet aggression and anger with softness and kindness, it will be difficult for anyone to stay mad at you. It is a simple but difficult discipline to maintain a smile and respond with kindness, even when others are coming at you with swords in their hands and swords in their hearts.

In my films, I’ve explored the inner progression of these stages. Often this means the journey from meaningless violence to martial arts wielded with purpose and integrity in service of life. In 2003, I filmed the movie *Unleashed* in France. I played Danny the Dog, a loan shark’s bodyguard who is raised and trained as an attack dog. Danny’s master controls him by using a metal dog collar around his neck. When Danny’s collar is off, he attacks viciously; when it’s on, he is tame and obedient. It is only through the kindness of a blind piano tuner and

his daughter, a virtuoso pianist, that Danny learns, slowly and arduously, to uncover the truth of his gentle and compassionate nature.

With this movie, I wanted to show what happens when martial arts skill is used for purely mercenary purposes. You could be a great fighter, but if you are stuck in the first stage and lack martial ethics, you are little better than a dog. A boss pays you, and you beat someone up; they pay more, and you kill someone for them. You're just like a machine, devoid of pride. I had never inhabited the mindset of a character who had the inner life of a ten-year-old boy. To do so, I had to forget about Jet Li and enter wholly into Danny the Dog. I stayed in his world for seven months during shooting. It was a terrible world to live in: all solitary aggression and no wisdom or compassion. During this time, it was very difficult for my loved ones to be around me. The process of becoming Danny the Dog was so painful that I didn't make another movie for a whole year afterward. My agents and collaborators kept calling me, but I turned down every project until I had regained my footing.

Whenever I had free time during the shoot on *Unleashed*, I focused my mind on reciting the six-syllable mantra "Om mani padme hum." The mantra is associated with Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, and is recited by millions of people for healing and spiritual development. I wanted to remain connected to the power of compassion as I acted out Danny the Dog's transformation.

Early one morning, I had a very powerful dream. I was locked in combat with a fierce opponent. Both of us were armed with knives, and we were slashing at each other. I tried all my moves and used all my strength, but toe-to-toe, I was evenly matched with my opponent. Just when it seemed like

the fight was at an inextricable impasse, a strong white light suddenly appeared behind me.

When I turned around, I saw a figure standing within the light. It was Avalokiteśvara, whose mantra I had been reciting again and again in waking life. Although Avalokiteśvara spoke no words, I still felt his question: “What are you doing?”

I cried out, “I want to kill my opponent! But somehow I can’t kill him!”

Avalokiteśvara’s face lit up with a smile, and he began to laugh. After he finished laughing, I felt him looking through my body. He asked me silently, “Have you ever heard of someone who can kill his own shadow?”

In that moment, I saw that my opponent did not exist at all; I was actually fighting against my own shadow, projected in front of me by the bright light.

When I woke up, I was shaken by my discovery. There was, after all, no enemy. I had created him. Part of the same web, to fight him and take his life was to take my own life. Ultimately, there is no enemy outside me. If the opponent does not exist, who am I competing with? It was my own mind that caused me to draw my sword. In life, it is my own hatred and fear that causes me to see others as my enemies, separate and different from me.

Every day on the news we see groups and entire countries locked in a seemingly inescapable cycle of attack and counter-attack, loss and retribution. We may see this in microcosm in our personal lives as well. These cycles are a visible representation of the wheel of suffering described by the Buddha. If life is truly interconnected, then the idea of taking revenge on the one who harmed you is both absurd and abhorrent. Revenge is always misguided. So often people ask, “Who started it? Whose violence is evil, and whose is self-defense?” If people perceive

the violence to be self-defense, they will forgive all kinds of transgressions. This is the premise of so many action movies. At the beginning, the protagonist's parents or wife or daughter—or in America, even his dog—is harmed or killed by the villains. The character decides to go after the villains and punish them, to meet violence with violence, and everyone calls him the hero. If he kills or breaks the law, the audience doesn't care. He is acting righteously, from a personal sense of justice, and people cheer for him. Still, violence like this will never teach anyone compassion or guide them to let go of the vengeance in their heart.

In 2005, I made the movie *Fearless*. By this time, I knew what audiences were looking for: impressive displays of prowess where the hero trounces the villains in all kinds of brutal and creative ways. With *Fearless*, I imagined something different. At that point, I had been studying Buddhism for almost ten years, and I wanted to communicate something from my own practice. I intended for it to be my final martial arts film, and for it to show not only the familiar physical battles and pyrotechnics, but the full expression of a life founded on martial ethics as I had come to understand them over thirty years of training. Working not only as the star but also the producer, I crafted and reviewed every line with care. After almost twenty years, I still feel that it expresses the highest level of my beliefs about martial arts. I have no higher teaching to share.

In the film, I played the martial artist Huo Yuanjia, a Chinese master who fought a series of widely publicized challenges with foreign fighters to restore the national pride of China in the early twentieth century. Yuanjia undergoes a transformative experience as a child: He watches his father defeat a challenger and hold back his final, fatal blow, sparing the challenger's life. The challenger fights dirty and beats Yuanjia's

father even after he has won. Witnessing his father's humiliation makes a profound impact on Yuanjia. He resolves to become a great martial artist, but his youthful anger and arrogance make him an impatient, reckless, and merciless fighter. Valuing winning over mercy, he has misunderstood the lesson of his father's bout and lost sight of his connection to the rest of life.

Yuanjia's hotheadedness and lack of restraint lead him to kill a rival master with the same blow to the chest that his father withheld years before. This sets off a terrible series of violent retributions, culminating in the death of his own mother and daughter. He must undergo a long period of mourning and purification, in which the rhythms of the natural world reteach him his humanity. He is finally ready to use his skill to serve life.

In one central scene, set in a small pavilion within a tranquil lily pond, Yuanjia sits across from Anno Tanaka, a Japanese martial arts master played by Nakamura Shidō II, to converse over a tea ceremony. The two fighters are set to compete soon, but at this point they are sharing their philosophies. Tanaka argues that it is meaningful to distinguish between different types of tea and to discern which ones are of better or worse quality. Yuanjia replies that he has no desire to distinguish between teas. After all, "Tea does not judge itself."

Tea here is a metaphor for the different styles of martial arts, which are about to be in competition. Yuanjia believes only the skill of the fighter is of any significance. As he says, "The purpose of competition is to discover and get to know one's real self...Ultimately, our real opponent may be ourselves."

This was the lesson Avalokiteśvara showed me in my dream, and I gave it to Yuanjia in this scene.

When Tanaka grasps the full implications of Yuanjia's statement, he bows and tells him, "Your words have gained my sincere respect."

Now, the discussion resolved, Tanaka invites Yuanjia to enjoy the tea.

"After you," says Yuanjia, smiling and bowing in turn.

This scene represents a pinnacle of martial ethics. The two men are about to enter the ring as challengers. They come from opposing nations with a long history of animosity. It would be so easy for them to see each other as instant enemies. Both men could arrogantly puff themselves up, claiming their fighting style was the best, striving to inspire fear in their opponent. Instead, they sit facing each other peacefully, each at ease with himself. They move slowly and softly. They listen to each other's ideas and respond thoughtfully, neither one raising his voice or speaking a sharp word. They act in harmony because they are aware that their connection to life transcends minor distinctions. Together, they are attuned to something greater than a physical victory: the deeper values of restraint, dignity, and humility that are the fruits of martial arts at its best. You can almost feel the white light of Avalokiteśvara's compassion in the smiles they offer each other.

The profound understanding achieved by the two men over their tea plays out in their manner of competing. When they do fight, neither views the other as his enemy, even when goaded on by the opposing camps they represent. Neither wants to gain a cheap victory at the cost of his values. And neither loses sight of the truth that both serve something greater with their skills—a way of living in harmony with other beings.

• • •

IT TAKES GREAT CIVILIZATION TO remember we are connected with all of life and to respond to conflict with a smile. In my life, this has meant working with my anger. The Buddha spoke of anger as having a poisoned root and a honeyed tip. The tip is honeyed because the promises anger makes in the moment are sweet: to take back control, to right a wrong with a wrong, to regain strength, to soothe the feeling of helplessness. But its root is poisoned because untempered anger will cause both you and the object of your aggression further harm. The fighter who has not learned to work with anger will always be seeking the honey, only to imbibe the poison.

We know from everyday experience that anger is harmful to our body and mind. I think of the moment when I broke my leg because I didn't want to compete, or when my outrage over mistreatment on set overshadowed my ability to direct my own film, or when Yuanjia in *Fearless* delivers a fatal blow to his opponent out of a hotheaded desire for vengeance. Anger is full of energy that is often misdirected, and this energy can quickly become destructive. From a Buddhist point of view, the destructive power of anger can even destroy the accumulated merit of hours or even months and years of practice in a single moment of impulse.

I remember a time when some friends read several untrue criticisms of me on the internet and came to me to express their outrage at the injustice on my behalf. Someone had publicly accused me of abandoning my two daughters from my first marriage, causing them to live in poverty. In fact, I have a very good relationship with these two daughters, who prefer to keep their lives private, and we have always been each others' support system. I have always taken care of them, and we have always supported each other.

Of course I felt angry at first. Because I had trained myself to recognize my emotions as they arise—however imperfectly—I was able to name my anger. I felt the tension in my limbs and the heat in my chest pushing me toward an impulsive act. But before I allowed my anger to make me react with indignation, I paused and looked into the situation myself. I discovered that some people had taken information out of context and found reasons to wrongly accuse me. Pausing allowed me to recollect my true values and ask myself a few questions:

“Is it worth having a conflict with this person?”

“Is it the person themselves that makes me angry, or what they did?”

“If it’s one action that angered me, then should I be angry with this person themselves?”

Once I had carefully observed both the situation and my reaction, I used the teachings I had studied previously to guide my reasoning. Someone, perhaps for selfish purposes, had fabricated these facts about me and my family. Faced with false accusations, I felt there was no need to waste resources to clarify them and set the record straight. This meant I did not have to take any action in response to the situation; I just had to practice with my own emotions. I could put down the sword in my hand.

However, with a sword still in my heart, I still felt angry. As I considered the whole picture, I used my mind to begin dismantling my beliefs about it, allowing me to face my emotion of anger directly. I recollected what I truly value. Recalling my intention to treat the world with compassion, I considered that this person was also suffering. I had no conception of their sit-

uation or what brought them to this point in life. Then I could understand that I was angry at this person's act, not at the person themselves. This relief allowed me to practice the best self-defense: I could smile at the entire melodrama. Gradually, I let go of the trouble and pain caused by my anger. I still practice this way today.

Stopping to reflect has helped me slow down my racing mind enough to recognize the impulsive nature of my emotions. The actual practice occurs when anger arises in the moment. We can recognize the impermanence of the situation: Our emotions are all transient—they arise and pass. This reflection allows us to set up a rational defense line for ourselves when we are angry. Through repeated practice, we can increase the number of times we recognize budding anger and reduce its ensuing harm.

You can work with your anger in the same way. Pause, recollect, and smile. Practicing awareness helps you recognize the strong rush of emotion as it comes, and the immediate desire to act. Once you've named the emotion, the trick here is to pause. Within the space of the pause, you can recall what you truly care about and how you want to act in the world. Ask yourself questions, watch your own emotion, and remember compassion. Then bring the smile back to your face. Hopefully your smile is genuine, but even if it's not, the practice is valuable.

This is not simply a practice of eliminating anger. It's also a practice of cultivating something positive in its place. While recognizing and dismantling anger, we can also use our emotion as an opportunity to cultivate the virtue of patience. Uprooting anger and cultivating patience are two sides of the same coin. Recalling the taijitu, we could even say that the presence of anger calls forth patience. Imagine the anger is the

black part of the yin-yang symbol. At the heart of it is a white dot of its opposite: patience. As we cultivate patience, our anger is tempered, and there is space in our heart for compassion, which leads us to smile, even when someone has wronged us. With practice, we can spread this compassion from ourselves to our families to our friends who were outraged on our behalf, and hopefully all the way to the person who overstepped or composed lies or took advantage. To smile even at the one who wronged us is to practice “no sword in the hand, no sword in the heart,” and to personify the true meaning of wushu.

Storytelling taught me to embody the inner evolution of a character, from separation to connection. In doing so, I learned how to bridge martial arts and spiritual inquiry. Stepping into one identity after another gave me a taste of acting ethically from the awareness that we are all part of one web of life. Still, it took me a long time to live out my values off-screen. Cultivating compassion is a lifelong practice. Often we must look deeply into our suffering to find a softening of our heart. In my life, I found a gateway to compassion within the collateral damage of my film career: the broken bones of my own body.

CHAPTER 4

**SEPARATE THE
BITTERNESS FROM THE
PAIN**





On the huge screen of the cinema, I've sailed through the air to deliver a flying bicycle kick to an opponent's chest; scrambled up and down tall ladders in a battle with a deadly wushu master while evading gunfire; disarmed two opponents with guns pointed at my head in a three-way standoff; and lifted two police motorcycles to crush a cop between them. I've dispatched my enemies with fists, feet, knives, spears, a kitchen towel, an umbrella, a fire hose, and even my own teeth.

In a movie, the action is seamless, precise, and jaw-dropping. But off-screen, these epic acts come at great cost to the performers. While shooting *Shaolin Temple*, I broke my leg. On *Kids from Shaolin*, I dislocated a cervical vertebra in my neck. On *Martial Arts of Shaolin*, I dislocated a lumbar vertebra in my back. The injuries kept coming. *Born to Defense*: broken nose. *Once Upon a Time in China*: broken left leg and ankle. *The Master*: broken wrist. In six different movies, I broke my hand. That's on top of the broken ankle and broken knee I already carried from my martial arts days. By the age of thirty-three, I'd broken seven different bones. Practically every time I filmed a movie, I'd end up with something broken, sprained, twisted, or dislocated. Each one left me disheartened.

Broken bones weren't the only physical obstacle I faced. I also had a long-standing stomach ailment that almost killed me in 1984 and continued to plague me for years after that. While filming *Hero* in 2001, I fell ill due to overwork and went to the hospital to receive an IV drip. And while filming *Fearless*

in 2005, I fell off a wooden platform and damaged my internal organs. These injuries and afflictions cast a shadow over my career. Each of them required a long recovery period, and the symptoms were painful. More than the physical pain, the mental anguish I suffered made the injuries indescribably worse. I worried, *Will I work again, or will this be the one that takes me out for good?* And I chided myself, *Stupid! How could you let this happen again?*

Performers who work in action films are always on the lookout for some kind of charm to keep harm away. There was a time in the 1980s, for example, when most of my stunt colleagues in Hong Kong rushed to Thailand to find the small amulets of a golden Buddha said to protect the wearer. The Thai Buddha amulet hadn't worked for me, so I was still searching for a way to avoid further injuries and protect myself on set. In 1994, while I was filming *Fist of Legend*, a friend gave me some vague advice about wearing Tibetan Dzi beads. These beads, usually made from etched agate in a cylindrical shape, were said to ward off physical harm and believed by some to have fallen from the heavens as gifts from the gods. In those days, when I heard about Tibet, my first thought was always magic. I rushed all around Hong Kong to find them and was delighted when I acquired my first set, a Double Heaven and Earth that held me transfixed in the display case of a humble shop.

I didn't know it, but the gleaming Dzi beads were the start of a transformation in my relationship to my pain and illness. They were my first point of contact with Tibetan tradition, and in an indirect way, they led me to my first Buddhist teacher.

In 1997, the art director Chen Gufang saw that I was still experiencing pain from all my injuries on set as well as my stomach ailment. She suggested I go to the Tibetan Buddhist Center

to get some special medicinal pills to take. I wanted to believe that something with such healing powers existed. Because the pills were from Tibet, I associated them in my mind with the supernatural, and a mixture of curiosity and desperation made me willing to experiment. I visited the Tibetan Buddhist Center in Hong Kong on my next free day.

When I walked into the center, I saw about a dozen lamas in red and saffron robes chanting. Their chants blended with a symphony of instruments: decorated trumpets, shining brass cymbals, brightly painted double-sided drums. The music was unlike anything I'd ever heard, both discordant and entrancing. And while I had no understanding of the meaning of the chants or the rituals they performed, I felt an instant affinity for the whole scene, just as I had with the Dzi beads. Eventually I was able to speak with the head of the center and ask him for two pills. Before I left, I stood in the doorway listening to the lamas. The rhythm of the chanting, simultaneously driving and calming, was hypnotic, and the melding of voices had an aching beauty. Although the harmony was unfamiliar to me, I felt like I was reuniting with an old friend after a long time away, as if I had stumbled into a homecoming.

At this time in my life, I avoided crowded places. Being surrounded by lots of people who all wanted my attention made me feel pressured and uneasy, like I was being hemmed in against a wall in a narrow alley. But I was so drawn to the polished brass ritual objects, the maroon robes and tapestries, and the vibrant five colors decorating the walls and pillars and ceilings, that I stood there in the doorway of the center and listened for more than an hour. I felt so peaceful that I forgot my stomach hurt at all.

The pills gave me some relief, but my stomach continued to bother me. As a film actor, I was often traveling between time

zones, hurriedly eating cold or unfamiliar food, pushing my body through take after take. I frequently went through bouts of twisting pain and stifling pressure, relying on painkillers to give me enough relief to finish my projects. Neither Western nor Chinese doctors could identify the root cause of my stomach ailment, so I continued to suffer without respite.

A year after my visit to the Tibetan Buddhist Center, Chen Gufang told me that a Tibetan Rinpoche was coming to Hong Kong and recommended that I go to see him about my stomach.

“What’s a Rinpoche?” I asked.

“Rinpoche is a title meaning ‘precious one.’ Lho Kunsang Rinpoche is a highly respected spiritual master and well-known doctor. He may be able to help you with your illness.”

My experiences with the Dzi beads and the chanting lamas were like threads in a labyrinth, leading me on to the next encounter. I fervently hoped that a Tibetan doctor could give me some relief from my chronic ailments. I returned to the Tibetan Center and was surprised by the large and diverse crowd of people gathered to pay their respects to the visiting master. Ms. Chen had told me to prepare a khata, a white silk scarf, and a red envelope with any amount of money as an offering. But how much should I put into the red envelope? I thought of it like a medical visit: *I’m here to see a doctor, and treatment is not cheap. I’ll cover it with 1,000 yuan.* My driver who was traveling with me also prepared a scarf and a red envelope, but his contained only 10 yuan.

As I passed through the door, I saw many lamas were present, including the Rinpoche. I stood there awkwardly, not knowing how to make my approach. I hadn’t received the Buckingham Palace etiquette training for how to pay my respects to such an esteemed person. Another participant ex-

plained to me that it is traditional to prostrate oneself when meeting the Rinpoche.

My skepticism toward religion flared up. *I kneel only to my parents!* I thought. *I don't even kneel to my martial arts master!*

At that moment, either I had to reason with myself to compromise or I had to walk out the door. *Surely, it's okay to bow to this man as a sign of respect, right?* But before I could bend down, the Rinpoche himself pulled me over and touched his forehead to mine. It was all so unfamiliar that my mind started to panic. *This must be a Tibetan custom*, I thought nervously. It was only after many years that I learned that this kind of forehead-touching was a special gesture, usually exchanged only between peers or close teachers and students. Rinpoche was greeting me as he would an old and dear friend. I had no idea how special it was to be received by Rinpoche in this way. Only later did I learn what an extraordinary person he was: how witnesses reported strange glows of white light surrounding the site of his birth, how he was believed to be the eighth reincarnation of a renowned Buddhist master, and how he was known internationally for his profound gift as a healer with a golden touch.

My first impression of Rinpoche was his warmth. His smile was radiant and guileless, and he offered it to everyone he met, from the humblest supplicant to the wealthiest patron. As a well-known film actor, I could tell when someone was putting on a show of goodness to extract something from me. But it was clear from the easy grace of Lho Kunsang Rinpoche's movements and the openheartedness of his attention to each conversation that he wanted nothing from me. I had never met anyone who so genuinely wanted to help relieve the suffering of others. Rinpoche didn't speak much Mandarin and I didn't

speak Tibetan, so we mostly communicated with our faces and hands. He had the joyful wrinkles of a sage around his eyes, and I couldn't help grinning.

After our first greeting, Lho Kunsang Rinpoche gave me a medical consultation. In simple Mandarin phrases, I told him about my physical condition, especially my persistent stomach ailment. He asked one of his assistants to heat a brick, which he wrapped in a simple cloth and laid on my stomach. I wasn't convinced that this doctor with his unusual bearing and esoteric techniques knew anything my doctors didn't know. Perhaps he could sense my doubt, because Rinpoche explained that all my hot compresses in the past were plastic hot water bags, which get cold quickly, whereas the temperature of the hot brick is long and stable, which is more effective. Under Rinpoche's gentle and firm hand, my body relaxed, and I surrendered to his healing touch. When the treatment was over, Rinpoche prescribed Tibetan medicine and instructed me on the dosage and frequency.

When it was time for me to leave, I stepped forward to offer the red envelope filled with 1,000 yuan. Barely glancing at it, Rinpoche instructed me to give it to one of the attendant lamas. The lama came over with a bamboo basket full of the same red envelopes. I put my envelope in the basket, and my driver also put his red envelope containing 10 yuan there. Then the lama set the bamboo basket aside.

When I saw him move the basket aside so casually, my heart murmured in protest: *I contributed 1,000 yuan in that red envelope! And now all the red envelopes are just mixed up like this? How will they know which one is from me, Jet Li?*

No one there cared about how much money was in anyone's envelope. I sat there, still ruminating, gazing at the pile of near-identical red envelopes in the bamboo basket.

• • •

I WANTED TO MAKE ANOTHER appointment with Rinpoche so I could make it clear how much I valued his treatment.

But as if the thoughts in my mind were laid bare, Rinpoche spoke first and said, “I want to go to your home.”

Rinpoche’s request threw me off. I hadn’t expected him to ask for an invitation. Still, I agreed, intrigued as I was by his affable manner and prowess as a healer. On the appointed day, my home was overrun by a line of lamas who marched right past me into my living room, one after another, in a seemingly endless parade, carrying ceremonial drums, brass cymbals, pairs of long trumpets, burnished Buddhist statues, brass offering bowls, and butter lamps.

What have I gotten myself into? I looked at my girlfriend and helplessly threw up my hands.

Suddenly my house was transformed into a ritual site. The lamas set up an altar in the living room. Armed with only a few Mandarin words and an abundance of hand gestures, the lamas started asking for things: five different-colored grains, five different-colored fabrics, and five types of scents. The list of incongruous items went on. In the end, the lamas asked for so many supplies that I had to call friends to help with the shopping.

“You want me to go out and buy *what?*” my friends asked. A gang of us went out to various stores to hunt down all the ingredients. It was like a scavenger hunt. I was puzzled and overwhelmed but also exhilarated. When they had arranged everything how they wanted it, Rinpoche and the lamas sat down on the floor and began to chant, low and fast. Again, my mind instinctively settled, and I was swept up into the venerable rhythms of the ritual. Lifting the articles we had purchased with practiced care, the lamas picked them up off the altar and

threw them into the fire, one by one. My house filled with fragrant smoke. I was confused: *Didn't we just go to a lot of trouble to acquire all this stuff?* One of the lamas explained that this was a Buddhist ceremony called a Smoke Offering, and we were invited to make wishes over the fire. After the ceremony, Rinpoche again treated my stomach ailment with a hot brick compress and gave me the two Buddhist statues they had brought.

Patiently coaching us syllable by syllable, Rinpoche taught my girlfriend and me how to recite the mantras appropriate to the two statues. He told us, "If you recite these wholeheartedly, you will obtain great blessings."

Now I was chanting in the same way I'd heard the lamas chant at the Tibetan Center. As I struggled to wrap my tongue around the sounds, the syllables felt both distant and familiar. Buddhism, with which I'd become enraptured, was beginning to pour into my life, into my home, into my own body.

After that day, I began to train with Lho Kunsang Rinpoche whenever possible. Rinpoche taught me to pay attention to the suffering I add to my own pain. His treatments cured me to a certain extent, but he also helped me to understand that although I might get better for a short time, sometimes being sick must become the ground for practice. My stomach ailment went from a disagreeable physical condition to an object of inquiry.

In Chinese, the word for "suffering" is *tongku*, composed of two characters: *tong* means "pain"; *ku* means "bitterness." So suffering is pain plus bitterness. Most of the time, people speak of these two characters together: pain-and-bitterness. They even speak colloquially about "eating the bitter." Without realizing it, they mix up the two and don't see them as separate. But in fact pain and suffering are two distinct phenomena.

Everybody knows when you break your arm, it hurts a lot in the moment, and you continue to feel pain for a short time afterward. Then you put it in a sling or a cast, can't move it for a week, and after a couple of months the arm is healed. There's a saying in Chinese: "If you break a bone or a ligament, a hundred days and you're cured." Unless there is some irregularity, pain is usually short term.

But the bitterness is all the mental processing *about* the pain. Every time I broke a bone, my mind would react by producing all kinds of thoughts, judgments, and fears. There was all the self-centered thinking: *Why am I unlucky? Why do I feel like shit? Why does bad stuff happen to me?* Then there was the judgment: *Stupid! Why am I so clumsy? Why do I never learn? Why can't I do it right?* Then there was the worrying: *What if I can't move it as well after this? What will happen to my work? Next time I need to be careful. Be careful, be careful. Oh no, I broke it again!*

If we try to fight our pain or outsmart it or destroy it, we're adding bitterness to pain, and the inevitable result is suffering. And if it goes untreated, the bitterness of suffering can follow us everywhere, no matter that our injury was healed long ago. There is no hundred-day limit to suffering. It can accompany us everywhere and creep into every waking moment.

This is how it was for me in the seventies and eighties when I was breaking all those bones in my early career. Pain and bitterness always came together. Although the resilience of my youthful body meant I healed quickly, mental bitterness always followed the physical pain, because I didn't know how to separate them. I worried about the effects of the injury on my career and tensed my body against the pain of future damage. As a result, I suffered constantly.

Then in the nineties I looked back on my disturbing pattern of injury and started to ask myself some serious questions: *How important is this career to me? Do I have bad luck, or is this just my fate? What if it happens again?*

I wrestled with these questions for quite a while, but in the end, I decided, *Well, I still like wushu and making movies. I enjoy my lifestyle: I make good money, I get to travel a lot, and I'm very comfortable. I want to be an action star, so that's why I take these chances. I might as well just keep forging ahead. If I make another movie, I might get injured. That's the risk. And if I break another bone, that's just another broken bone. I can let it heal, then get back to work. My job is like this. I'll just try to be careful.*

And now, after I have been through many years of injuries and aging, pain is there perhaps more than ever. But many years of Buddhist practice have taught me to view it differently. Even today, my stomach is a problem 10 percent of the time. Every time I feel the discomfort, it prods me, reminds me to study, to do something to help people. It's like an alarm bell that keeps waking me up to the fragility and impermanence of existence. If I can cure my physical pain, great. But even if I can't, I feel less bitterness about my pain, so I suffer less. I've learned to observe my bitterness and recognize it as the creation of my own mind. If I get injured now, I tell myself, *It's better now than in the future.* I take a wider perspective.

When I look back on all my injuries and ailments, I see them in a different light. I realize now how they led me to Tibetan Buddhism, which has become my guide in my search to go beyond life and death. If I hadn't broken all those bones, I would never have become interested in Dzi beads. If I hadn't sought out the Dzi beads, I wouldn't have been receptive to Ms. Chen's suggestion that I take medicinal pills for my ongoing

ing physical discomfort. If I hadn't sought out the pills, I would never have stood transfixed in the doorway of the center in Hong Kong and felt that sensation of familiarity as I listened to the ritual chanting of the lamas there. And if I hadn't been drawn to the atmosphere in that place, I would never have had the open-mindedness to visit Rinpoche, receive treatment, and learn to look beneath my physical sensations to the deeper truth of impermanence.

Physical pain also helped me break out of my narrow conception of what meditation looks like. Some beginning meditators believe that in order to practice, you must be sitting in full lotus in a completely silent environment—preferably a remote cave on the side of a high mountain—holding your gaze absolutely still. Due to my injuries, I couldn't do full lotus. I brought this problem to one of my masters, who advised me to try half lotus. At first I could sit there for only five minutes before my knee started to hurt. My master assured me my struggles were normal, that everyone begins like this, and advised me to do another five minutes again.

Slowly I worked up from five to ten to fifteen minutes. When I could do forty minutes, I worked on drawing it out to an hour; at an hour, I went for two. I approached meditation posture like an athlete, pushing through pain, reaching for personal milestones, stretching my capacity, as if it were a physical problem to be solved.

Many years later, a different master watched me striving to achieve the "right" posture and told me, "Don't be overly focused on achieving the correct posture. The purpose of posture is to support your inquiry into your heart."

In that instant, I began to untangle myself from a lifetime of fairly ruthless physical discipline. After many years, I've determined the posture most comfortable for me is *lalitasana*, or

“royal ease,” a relaxed seated pose with one leg tucked inward and the other hanging down. There are so many kinds of meditation. You can begin by practicing while walking, sitting in a chair, lying down—as long as your back is straight. You can listen to music if you want. The point is to start by remaining aware of your experience. Too much pain distracts the mind. Just as we suffer when we train the body and neglect the mind, so do we suffer when we train the mind and neglect the body.

The Buddhist masters I met taught me so much about facing suffering with clarity of mind and courage. I remember once I was going to give a public lecture with the Zen Master Shengyen. Before the talk, he and I were speaking backstage. Master Shengyen was getting older, and he had many health ailments.

“Your body is in so much pain,” I said. “You need kidney dialysis every week. Isn’t it difficult for you?”

His expression was very calm. He took my hand and said, “Yes, it really hurts, but it’s not bitter in my mind. Pain is a matter of the body, and suffering is a matter of mind and emotion.”

Often how we relate to pain is a matter of perspective on a deeper level. Once, when I was studying with Tai Situ Rinpoche, another great Tibetan Buddhist master, at his monastery in India, he instructed the students present to hold out the thumb of our right hand and focus our attention on it. All of us held out our thumbs like we were giving a positive review: thumbs-up.

“Now, do your best to visualize all the pain and suffering in your life so far—all the loss, grief, hurt, illness, and disappointment. Imagine that all this pain and suffering is concentrated entirely in your right thumb.”

We thought Tai Situ Rinpoche was giving us a tantric mudra to practice, a symbolic hand gesture that emphasizes an aspect of energy transformation, so we followed his instruction diligently and tried to concentrate as hard as we could on our thumbs.

“Now close your eyes and carefully touch your thumb containing all your pain to your right eyelid,” he said. “As you touch, make sure you hold all the painful and unsatisfactory things in your life in your attention. Leave nothing out. You are holding a whole lifetime of pain in your thumb.”

I held my thumb to my eye, evoking my injuries one by one: my broken ankle, my broken knee, my broken nose, placing each memory in turn in my thumb. I thought of the loved ones I had lost, and my professional frustrations, and my loneliness. I put it all in my thumb.

“Now keep your thumb close to your right eye, but open the eye,” he said.

We did as we were instructed. My thumb was enormous, blotting out most of my vision.

“Is everything you see filled with sadness and pain?” Tai Situ Rinpoche asked.

We all nodded.

“Take away your thumb,” he said.

The world around me came rushing back into my sight: my own body, the other students withdrawing their own thumbs, the master, the ornate furnishings of the room.

“Do you realize that the world is still there and still beautiful, even when you couldn’t see? Do you understand that all the misfortune and pain of life are only within the scope of a thumb?”

The students looked around the room in wonder. It was like recovering from temporary blindness. In relation to a single

human thumb, the world seemed vast.

Tai Situ Rinpoche continued, “All your painful feelings are magnified by your own mind. If you look only at your pain, you won’t be able to perceive the beauty around you. There’s nothing in this life that can’t be changed by a shift in perspective. Most living beings are in pain because they’re staring at their thumb, thinking it’s the whole world.”

There is so much power in simply observing the experience of pain. When we’re hurting, we often assume the pain is enduring, unchanging, solid. But the truth is, pain, like all physical sensations, is much more slippery: Its center shifts, its intensity increases and diminishes, its temperature rises and falls. In the midst of pain, we may even notice brief sensations of pleasure or numbness. Nor is our own awareness of pain constant. Even in moments of sharp pain, our attention may wander to a sunbeam sliding along the wall or to the memory of a childhood injury, breaking up what we call “being in pain” to a series of interrupted snapshots. Training with pain can become a laboratory for witnessing all the ways we overlay thinking onto physical sensation. When we’re able to put a bit of space between our thoughts and our senses, separating the bitterness from the pain, we can have a much more direct encounter with the raw materials of our lives. We may even begin to notice that a lot of what we believe to be our “self” is only the bitterness of the mind added to the pain of our experience.

Over the past twenty-five years, I’ve visited the mountains of Garzê, Sichuan, for retreat many times. I’ve also traveled several times to Tibet, Qinghai, Gansu, India, Nepal, and Bhutan. The people there live immersed in the teachings of the Buddha, and naturally chant sutras, recite mantras, prostrate themselves, and make pilgrimages. They are accustomed to dedicating the merit they create for the benefit of all sentient

beings. Some elders practice with a smile even when they are in terrible physical pain. Their attitude toward the phenomena of life and death is tranquil. Even if they get a terminal medical diagnosis, they can still say, “No problem!” On the other hand, people in our highly developed societies face the same diagnosis with painful feelings of helplessness and panic. Their anxiety may even compel them to overtreat themselves, adding to the burden of their body and mind.

I like to joke that Buddhists have invested in the most valuable insurance: confidence in the Buddha’s teaching. They buy their policies in childhood and renew them each year. They may not have great wealth or physical comfort, but they have made peace with life’s inevitable destruction and will not panic in the face of death.

The Buddha taught that there are several different kinds of suffering (*dukkha* in Sanskrit). The first and most immediate type of suffering is called *dukkha-dukkha*, or “the suffering of suffering.” This refers to the obvious and direct forms of physical and emotional pain that all beings experience. *Dukkha-dukkha* encompasses physical pain, including illness, aging, hunger, thirst; difficult emotions such as grief and sorrow, fear and anxiety, anger, jealousy, loneliness and heartbreak; and the basic hardships of life such as poverty, exposure to harsh weather and dangerous environments, conflict and violence, and the effort required to survive and thrive in a competitive world. Everyone understands this from their own lives. This kind of suffering is a universal part of experience. No one can escape *dukkha-dukkha*, no matter their wealth, fame, or power.

With the guidance of my teachers, I learned to follow the suffering in my body to the suffering in my mind. Like so many of us, I had been taught in childhood that freedom came from

worldly achievement: wealth, fame, and power. But in the nineties, after years of success, I was starting to question this belief. A crisis across the Asian world gave me the opportunity to renounce my former goals and become receptive to an entirely different approach to the problems of life.

CHAPTER 5

**SEE THE SKIES BEYOND
THE SKY**





In the summer of 1997, the Asian economy collapsed.

First, the value of the Thai baht plummeted, setting off a rapid drop in the stock market and a wave of corporate bankruptcies. The crisis rippled out from Thailand to South Korea and Indonesia, and ultimately through to China, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Japan. Currencies and stocks fell catastrophically, and millions of people fell below the poverty line. People all over the world were afraid that this financial contagion would lead to a global economic meltdown.

Everywhere I went at that time—out in the street, at friends' homes, at restaurants and gatherings for the film industry—people were discussing the crisis: How long would it go on? What exactly happened? What will crash next? When would the economy bounce back? On TV, I saw heated debates, protests, and riots. People of every socioeconomic stratum lamented their losses. Rich people had lost more money, but poor people had lost a larger percentage of their overall assets. The suffering was written on the faces of all.

I had lived through economic crises before, but they hadn't really touched me. Even when the Hong Kong stock market crashed in 1987, people still wanted to make action movies. But now, suddenly, the entire Asian film industry ground to a halt. In the past, funds for each project could be raised before shooting began, but now that was not possible. If you had a movie you'd already made, you couldn't sell it.

It was the first time in my career I had even a couple of months to reflect. Up to that point, I had been going and going, doing and doing, making and making, the wheels always spinning, the Jet of my namesake always flying fast. Since my first starring role in *The Shaolin Temple* in 1982, I had made over twenty films. Between 1990 and 1997, my success in film took off and I earned my first pot of gold. This had been my dream since childhood.

Now, with the economic instability tearing across the Asian world, the pressure and uncertainty of the external environment put everything in a fresh perspective. I questioned my goals and asked myself: *Even if I did make my first fortune, what's next? If it's so easy to lose money due to powerful forces beyond my control, how can money give me the security I'm seeking?* I had to be honest with myself: Although I'd achieved the fame and wealth I'd wanted when I was younger, the reality of my life was different from my dream. I had gotten married, then separated from my wife. I was the father of two young daughters. I was famous, but I hated being interviewed and avoided parties. I worried all the time. My success hadn't liberated me from concerns over my career, my health, and my relationships. I saw the limits of my assumptions about what could give me the freedom I sought and what it would feel like. I hadn't transcended to an inner peace beyond the ceaseless interplay of yin and yang. I hadn't learned to embody zizai or go beyond life and death. I couldn't sit back, relax, and enjoy. I couldn't just be.

Like many people of my generation, I was raised to believe that worldly success would be the source of my happiness. We were all taught some version of this: "If you study harder, work harder, show you're special, get famous, become successful, make lots of money, win lots of love, you will be happy."

Everyone believed that. Many children today are taught the same thing. Their parents put so much pressure on them and drive them hard to succeed, believing that success will make their children happy. For me, this started when I was a child, and I vowed to make money to support my mother and my siblings. I believed only money could make me feel safe and secure. But now, in 1997, I had money, and I still felt insecure. I was not free inside. I wasn't the boss of my own life.

I looked at the people around me. Yes, I had achieved success as a movie actor, but compared to what? True, I was no longer making only 1 yuan per day, as I did on *Shaolin Temple*, but compared to a Hollywood actor, I was nobody. And even if I continued to make successful movies—at the cost of my breaking my arms and legs—I would never make as much money as the wealthiest people in the business world reaping the benefits of global investments. On top of that, the wealthy people I knew weren't happy, either. By that time, I'd gotten to know some very successful and prominent people, and I was shocked to learn that their money didn't protect them from suffering. They had their own problems that kept them up at night—a struggling child, a professional betrayal, a physical ailment. And then there were the millions of people working themselves to the bone just to scrape by, and they were suffering, too. Everyone was hooked and no one was free.

Something is wrong here, I thought. All these people working hard should just be getting happier and happier, but they're not. And I'm not, either.

I started to imagine myself in thirty years. What would my life amount to if I just kept on making movies? As far as I could see, I would still be suffering at the end of my life. Is this all a waste of time? My experience was revealing to me the hollowness of the beliefs I had been taught. A dizzying insight began

to come into perspective: Everything I have and everything I know can disappear. All the material things I've spent my life chasing and all the roles I've frenziedly worked to fulfill are insubstantial and must be surpassed. I needed to learn to be okay with losing things, even the things I considered most precious—even my own life. As long as I persisted in clinging to any of them, I would continue to suffer like everyone around me.

So who's not suffering? I wondered.

In the process of seeking the Dzi beads, I had also gotten a glimpse of Tibetan Buddhism for the first time. In my rudimentary learning, I knew that Buddhism claimed to be a way to help all living beings escape suffering and achieve true happiness. Then I revisited the story of the Buddha himself. Twenty-five hundred years ago, he was an Indian prince named Siddhartha Gautama who had everything the world could offer. He had fame, fortune, adoration, and even the power to control whether his subjects live or die. But he was still suffering. Thus, he devoted his life to discovering a way out of the cyclical unsatisfactoriness of life and death.

This story struck me. Even if I had every sports car in the world, spacious homes in New York, Los Angeles, Paris, and Hong Kong, and beautiful women to accompany me to glamorous parties I didn't even want to attend, I wouldn't avoid the inevitable losses of old age, illness, and death. And even if I became the most famous movie star in the world, I wouldn't command the power of a leader of government. And even the most powerful world leader can't avoid the insecurity of constant change.

I thought to myself, *If Buddhism is truly so effective in addressing life's suffering, then it must be worth trying! For over two thousand years, Buddhism has had many followers, among them scholars, intellectuals, nobles, and kings. They*

couldn't all be fools! I was so excited that a solution to the problem of life might exist. I needed to understand more.

It was fashionable at that time to have a copy of *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* by Sogyal Rinpoche, who would later become one of my masters. I'd had the book lying around for weeks, but during my time off due to the Asian financial crisis, I finally looked at it carefully. It spoke about dying and reincarnation in a way that I had never even considered. At that time, there was no YouTube, so if I wanted to watch anything, I had to find it on VHS. Eventually I found a documentary about the Tibetan perspective on the cycle of death and rebirth on cassette. It was like watching an incredible adventure movie. It talked about death: how the process between death and reincarnation lasts forty-nine days and passes through three *bardos*, liminal states between death and rebirth, and how the masters recognized reincarnated Rinpoches. The detail with which Tibetan Buddhists had mapped out the process of dying and return was staggering. I was haunted by this inquiry into the mysteries of life and death.

At home, I liked to invite friends to play badminton. Nothing is better to help keep your reflexes fast than the snap of sending a shuttlecock over the net. I would stand on one side of the court and let my friends take turns playing against me on the other side. One day a young man from Taiwan named Vincent noticed that I was chanting something during our match. After our match, he came over and asked me: "Mr. Li, are you chanting the Green Tara mantra?"

At that time, Tibetan Buddhism was not yet well-known in the United States. Chanting the Green Tara mantra was my own private habit, so I was very surprised by Vincent's question.

“You know about the Green Tara mantra?” I asked.

“Yes, I’ve been drawn to Buddhism since I was a child,” he said.

Vincent became my first Buddhist friend. He introduced me to many Buddhist books, including traditional biographies such as *The Life of Milarepa* as well as contemporary masterpieces by teachers like the Zen master Shengyen. I hungrily sought out all the Buddhist wisdom I could. I must have read a hundred Buddhist books at that time. I had so many questions: What was revealed to the Buddha in his enlightenment experience? Can an ordinary person like me, who has not spent his life training, achieve the same freedom, beyond the limited definition of freedom I’d been taught? If so, what is the quickest path to get there?

Gradually a new goal was forming in my mind, the fruit of years of experience: to truly solve the problem of life. There’s a Chinese saying: “There are skies beyond the sky, and people beyond people.” This means there’s always more in this world, and what you see depends on the perspective you have. I was beginning to perceive the limitations of my childhood dreams, and to comprehend that material guarantees do not exist. Without realizing it, I was having an experience of what the Buddha called renunciation.

Renunciation (*naiṣkramya* in Sanskrit) refers to a realization about what can and what cannot bring a person lasting happiness. Material phenomena are characterized by three qualities: unsatisfactoriness, impermanence, and lack of an essential self. This means that by their very nature, these phenomena are unable to provide us with lasting and reliable satisfaction. If we cling to any of them, we will continue to suffer. When we see through to the true nature of things, we see how they can’t provide us with abiding happiness. We become disillusioned with

them. Instead, we become animated by the prospect of liberating ourselves from clinging and acting in service of the liberation of others.

Renunciation here doesn't mean giving up material possessions and living the ascetic lifestyle of a full-time monk. Rather, it means a change in how we relate to our worldly desires, possessions, and self-centered pursuits. Instead of feeling so attached to them that they overshadow our deeper identity, we cultivate an inner sense of equanimity: We're okay when our lives are going as we want them to, and we're okay when they're not.

When people read stories of personal transformation, they often expect to hear about a single moment in which everything changed—suddenly, all at once, like flicking on a light switch. But that has not been my experience. Imagine everything that goes into making a light switch work. First, you must make sure you have a power source hooked up to a circuit breaker that sends electricity to different parts of the house. Then you must install the hidden multicolored wiring that connects the charge from the power source to the bulb. You must choose a light fixture that goes with the overall decor. You must install the switch itself in the wall and align the hot wire and the ground wire just so. You must complete all these preliminary stages before you can simply flip the switch and turn on the light.

In my life, before I was ready to be receptive to Buddhism, I had to hear my grandmother's stories of Manjushri and lose my father and win those five championships and break my bones; to start my own production company and make a fortune and meet Lho Kunsang Rinpoche and live through a financial crisis. There are countless other factors I can't even calculate. All these things had to happen before that switch could

get flipped and the light could turn on. Many spiritual seekers expect the light to come on right away. They are forgetting that the wiring that powers the light is a pathway formed over time by countless small and unnoticed connections. Often it takes many years of wiring before the light turns on.

When I look back, the seeds of my journey were apparent early on. I was one of countless Chinese children who memorized the opening to the Buddha's *Heart Sutra*: "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form." We had no idea what it meant; we just thought it sounded cool. Then in 1980, I acted in *Shaolin Temple* at the Guoqing Temple on Tiantai Mountain in the Zhejiang Province. The temple was a thousand years old but well maintained by the monks who made their home there. The abbot of the temple back then was very strict. Even though we were secular guests filming a movie, he required that we all learn traditional temple etiquette and practice for three days in the lead-up to the shoot. He and the monks drilled us in how to enter the hall, how to hold incense, how to make offerings, and how to kowtow. I loved the training at the time: it really got me into the headspace of my character Jue Yuan. I could control my body and could quickly execute the ritual movements correctly.

There were about thirty actors in our group playing the role of Shaolin monks, but the abbot was mostly indifferent to them. Me, however, he noticed. One day on set he approached me and said, out of nowhere, "My child, you are destined to become a Buddhist. Do you want to become a monk?"

The film's director overheard our conversation and was shocked. He protested loudly, "No way! If I'm halfway through shooting and he goes to be a monk, the movie is over!"

I just smiled at the time. I was sixteen, and it had never even occurred to me to renounce and devote myself to

Buddhism.

In the summer of 1997, though, I saw how at a surface level, renunciation matched the way I already thought about life. I didn't need to change my lifestyle significantly. I avoided crowds and parties; I never stayed out late or went to night-clubs to get drunk. Maybe I was a Buddhist for many lifetimes already. You could say I was a Buddhist before I was Buddhist.

My newfound captivation with Buddhism ignited a hope in me to finally take control of my life from the inside out. It also revealed to me just how hooked I was, how much my behavior was still governed by my own self-centered desires and fears. I wanted to take a radical step to liberate myself from suffering.

By 2003, filmmaking ceased to be my primary pursuit. Through the study of Buddhism, I was able to move beyond myself and uncover a deeper, more meaningful path in life.

For one thing, I was so tired. When I first became famous, I was so excited: brash, bouncy, and volatile. Fame was what I'd always wanted. Everyone knew my face! Everyone knew I was talented! Before my film debut, only people in the martial arts world knew I was special, not the whole of Chinese society. After my film came out, I basked in the center—for a few years. After five years of that kind of fame, I learned to accept it as part of my job. I no longer liked it, but I resigned myself to it as a cost of my success. But after twenty years of everyone knowing me and wanting a piece of me, and every journalist asking me the same questions, I was fed up. Success was not freedom. Yes, I no longer belonged to the Chinese government, but now I belonged to the entertainment industry and above all, the public. My agent, my manager, and my publicity team were always telling me my next steps, and reporters were always cajoling me to strike a pose. I was part of a machine.

As a public figure, I no longer owned my time. I couldn't go to a restaurant and quietly eat a meal because, as soon as I sat down, someone wanted to take a picture or ask me for an autograph. I lost time with my family and with my friends. I lost time with myself. I had maybe thirty minutes of solitude in my whole day. People expected me to look a certain way, be reasonable, answer every question courteously. Even when filming ended, I was still acting. That was living in other people's life scripts.

I was ready for a new chapter. Each stage of life has its own internal logic. I had made enough money and achieved enough fame and influence to provide a good life for my mother, my family, and my children—to do right by them by my own standards. This was my goal from the time I was a boy, and I had reached it. I no longer needed to accumulate more fame, power, wealth, or love, because I saw that they would not help me transcend the suffering of life.

At that time, I met with Lho Kunsang Rinpoche and told him of my intention.

He asked me, "Why are you retiring?"

I told him: "To study Buddhism. To live a religious life."

Then Rinpoche answered me: "You can't retire—not yet."

I was confused. I assumed he would support my decision. Wasn't full-time practice the way to advance?

I said to Rinpoche, "Everybody else has urged me to renounce the world, study the scriptures, and become a monk. But you, of all people, are telling me, 'Go back to work.' Why?"

"You still have a mission and a responsibility," he said.

"How is that possible?" I asked. "I'm content with what I've been given and with what I've been able to give back. I'm satisfied with my career, my reputation, and my ability to provide for my family. I've accomplished everything I set out to do

when I was a child. What more can anybody in the world ask of me? What is my mission?" I asked.

He said, "It's not something you owe to an individual. You still have a larger responsibility."

"Well, what is it?" I asked. If I knew what it was, maybe I could disagree or argue or refuse to take on the responsibility he was talking about.

He said, "There is no way for me to identify it for you. You will realize it on your own through experience."

"Okay," I said, "if you say so. I'll look for it."

My mind was racing, trying to understand my guru's guidance. Maybe, instead of the traditional way of practicing Buddhism by becoming a monastic, I could use my secular identity to spread Buddhist teachings? I had no idea what he was talking about, and I was skeptical. My film career answered for me, showing me the next step.

Lethal Weapon 4 marked the shift in my film career from Hong Kong to Hollywood. Right off the bat, Hollywood gave me many opportunities to practice nonattachment. Before filming even began, the studio played hardball with the contract negotiation. First, they offered me a million dollars. I said I'd think about it. The next day, they said \$750,000. I said I'd think about it and discussed it with my girlfriend. The next day, they offered \$500,000. I thought, *Oh, I am starting to understand. This is the American game.*

I was also making a large cultural transition. In Asia, I was a big star. Directors and studios wanted to make me happy. But in America, nobody cared what I wanted. In the late nineties and early aughts, there were very few roles for Asian actors. I knew I would have to work doubly hard just to prove what I could do. To begin with, I didn't speak the language. I had to

study English like a child, sitting with my flash cards and reciting “A is for apple, B is for boy.”

There was also a shift in the kind of character I was expected to play. In Asia I had pretty much always played the hero. Most of my best-known characters were highly ethical, like Wong Fei-hung from *Once Upon a Time in China*, and Chen Zhen from *Fist of Legend*. But in *Lethal Weapon 4*, I was going to play the villain, a ruthless and cruel Triad gangster named Wah Sing Ku who even punches out a pregnant woman. As terrible as my character is in the film, the original script portrayed him as infinitely worse. When I first received the script, my girlfriend and I had a huge fight. Even though she’d encouraged me to take the role, she was horrified by the part when she saw it.

“Why are you doing this?” my girlfriend asked me. “You’ll destroy your career and destroy your life. I don’t want you to do it.”

I didn’t like the role any more than she did, but I understood this was my chance to break into a new market, and I knew I had to prove myself. Because my identity no longer rested solely on my film career, I wasn’t worried that playing a villain would ruin my life.

Making a film in America was quite different from making one in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong film industry in the nineties was like a family business. There were not that many people involved, and each participant had a lot of input. The business proposition was quite straightforward. If a buyer heard I was going to be in a film, no matter what it was, they would buy it for the Asian market. Then they’d ask, “What’s next? Let me buy that, too.” Then they wanted to know what I was making after that. In this way, I’d make three movies in a row. The production was homegrown, straightforward, and

streamlined. We'd find a story, decide on cast and crew, and make the movie.

But in America, there were so many people involved. Suddenly I needed a lawyer, a manager, an agent, and a publicity team. Every decision had to be greenlit by countless gatekeepers at the studio; every change had to pass through a lengthy chain of command. This was a giant corporation with a business mindset. Even if one artist or performer had a creative vision, the studio had final cut. It was not possible to have the same feeling of control I felt in Hong Kong.

Because of my disillusionment with material success and my goal to become truly free, I kept my focus on my search for wisdom. I understood that the most important purpose in my life was to pursue awakening. Film was just my job. My career in America became a testing ground to cultivate renunciation.

Lethal Weapon 4 proved to be hugely successful. The studios did audience tests on the film, and I scored just under Mel Gibson—among both men and women. The head of a big studio called me into his office and told me, “Okay, Jet, you’re bankable. We’re going to give you \$25 million. Go kick some guys’ asses and make a shitburger that will make us all money.”

From there, I made a series of successful American action movies. I kicked guys’ asses and made us all money. Within a year, I was back to playing the hero. Life is movement. I broke into the market just as I intended to. Still, I knew that no matter how hard I tried, I could never reach the top of the American movie business. Instead, I held the shining beacon in my heart of limitless skies beyond the skies I’d known, a freedom that went beyond all the changing identities of my life.

My practice kept me sane during that time. If I had tried to cling to my previous fame, my successful identity, or the filmmaking process, I would have caused myself infinitely more

suffering. My newfound mindset allowed me to keep my focus on what really mattered.

The whole time I was on set for *Lethal Weapon 4*, I was practicing. When I was in the makeup chair, I used my headphones to listen to Buddhist teachings. When I was standing around waiting to shoot, I flicked my beads and recited my mantras. I learned just enough English to deliver my lines and answer journalists' questions during interviews. I spent much more time practicing than I ever spent working on any movie.

When Lho Kunsang Rinpoche taught me the Guru Rinpoche and Green Tara mantras, he told me I needed to chant each mantra 100,000 times. I completed both quickly in the United States. At first, 100,000 recitations sound unimaginable. But I had all the habits I needed to undertake a repetitive training program. As a child athlete, I was used to maintaining a disciplined practice under the instruction of a coach. Now I was in a hurry to get enlightened, always thinking about the next step.

Then life itself gave me a sharp teaching on the unavailability of loss. In 1999, I remarried, and by April 2000, my third daughter was born. Just as this new life entered the world, another was preparing to leave. In July, I learned that my mother was critically ill with cancer. I was filming in Paris at the time, and I left my job and flew back to Beijing to visit her. I wanted a guide to help prepare me to lose my mother, and I returned to the text that had been my first entryway to Buddhism: *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. I took a copy with me to study on the plane. I had studied Buddhism for about three years by that time, but now I wondered if I could put it to use.

When I returned home, my mother was about to pass away. My relatives and friends were reluctant to leave her. *The*

Tibetan Book of Living and Dying instructs us to create peace at the end of life and to invite the dying person to leave peacefully. However, these are all theories. In reality, at this moment, my relatives and my mother's friends were all surrounding her bed crying and tending to her. How could I dare to invite her spirit to leave her body in front of all these people who wouldn't understand?

I took the doctor aside and asked him, "If all methods of treatment are exhausted, how much longer can my mother live?"

The doctor replied, "A week at most."

I discussed my mother's condition with my eldest sister. We agreed that it didn't matter whether my mother left a week earlier or a week later. The most important thing to me was that her death would not be too painful. We agreed to inform the doctor that he should avoid excessive measures to prolong her life.

As my mother went into her final decline, I was acutely aware of the truth that all things arise and pass away, and I wanted to give her a peaceful send-off. I asked everyone to leave so that I could be alone with my mother for a while. At this time, I said to her:

"When you're gone, I will take care of things. You can go without worries. With me at home, my brothers and sisters will have no worries about food and housing for the rest of their lives. Your grandchildren can also get a good education to set them up for a good life. I will ensure all their basic needs are met."

My mother didn't speak. We sat together in silence, just breathing. The room became very still as I held her hand, feeling her soft pulse in mine. It seemed like a long, long time

passed. When you are with someone at the end of their life, you can feel the proximity of the vastness they will soon return to.

Finally my mother looked at me and said, “It’s just a matter of breath.”

A few hours later, my mother died.

Her final words sum up the transience, fragility, and beauty of a human life: “It’s just a matter of breath.”

• • •

SUCH A PROFOUND FIRSTHAND ENCOUNTER with the quiet transformation of death compelled me to ask myself deep questions: *If death is not the end, what’s beyond it? What form does my mother have now, or does she have one at all?* My mother’s body may have died, but now I carry her in my memories and in the manifestations of my grief: my hollow chest, stinging eyes, and slumped shoulders; I feel her in my strong will to protect and provide for my family. I wondered if she had indeed been reborn and hoped it was in the best possible circumstances. I asked myself: *Would I recognize her if she reappeared in my life?* Two contradictory feelings coexisted in my heart: the pain of losing her, severe and conclusive; and the sense of her enduring presence. I reflected on the many Jet Lis that had already died in my life—the infant, the boy, Li Lianjie the martial arts champion, Jet Li the young man who still believed in the illusion of perfect happiness through worldly success—and felt the same enduring presence underlying all of them. *If when I die, I thought, something of me will endure as my mother endures with me, maybe death isn’t what I thought it was.*

After these reflections, it was easy for me to perceive the transience of worldly circumstances. I knew from the beginning that the American chapter of my career was temporary. I

saw which way the winds were blowing. I was going to give it five years. Soon Americans would know how to do everything with special effects anyway. Then they wouldn't need Asian actors to perform flying kicks because American stars could be made to look like masters of martial arts. When that happened, I would need to go back to Asia to work. So why put too much energy into it? Worldly success, no matter how great, is always subject to impermanence. It will always change.

I remember an episode that expressed the stark contrast between my public life and my inner life. In 2001, I was in Japan promoting my film *Hero*. The film was a huge hit. I went from one large press junket to the next, swarmed by fans and cameras. Before each event, I sat in a large dressing room surrounded by people—the makeup artist, the fashion consultant, the publicity agent. Then I went out and answered the same questions: “Why are you excited about the film? Who’s your character? Are you happy to be back in China? What’s the future of Asian cinema?” Each night, I returned to a luxury hotel room, ate an expensive dinner, and listened while my team told me what to do next. Everywhere I went, people wanted something from me.

After the promotional tour, I flew back to China, then traveled to Xining. From there, I journeyed west many hours by car to the Kunlun Mountains, where I met my teacher, Lho Kunsang Rinpoche. For the next seven days, we practiced Buddhism in a cave. I didn't need to shave or trim my hair. I could choose whatever clothing felt comfortable to me and eat simply. It was like I was in hiding after all that time in the spotlight. No one wanted anything from me. I didn't have to pretend to be someone I wasn't. Instead, I could explore the deepest truth of my life without external intrusion. From the perspective of my childhood self, the promotional tour should

have been happiness, while meditation in a remote mountain range should have been suffering. Surely a luxury hotel room is better than a cave! But for me, at that time in my life, the opposite was true.

Whatever we rely on outside of ourselves, that's our boss. We're its employees. We give it our energy, time, and intelligence. If we put all our energy into making money, money is our boss; if we put it all into achieving fame, fame is our boss. If we work hard and save all our money so we can buy an Apple Watch, believing the Apple Watch will provide us with lasting happiness, then the watch is our boss. Most of us work in the service of our five senses: We seek pleasure and avoid pain, constantly drawing near and pushing away, chasing and being chased. When this agitated reactivity keeps knocking us off our center of gravity, *zizai*, the confident contentment of knowing we're our own boss, is elusive.

If anything outside of ourselves is our boss, we suffer. So often, when we act, we anticipate a particular result. If we get it, we're certain we'll be happy; if we don't, we're sure we'll be unhappy. If we anticipate like that, the particular result we cling to is our boss. And it doesn't stop there. Even if we attain the results we wanted, we immediately move on to the next one. Or we don't get what we want, and our mind seizes on something else or holds on obsessively to the result that got away. We stumble blindly from boss to boss, chasing happiness and never catching it. When something outside of ourselves is our boss, we can't use our energy to become free or to free others. This is the cycle of suffering. To break the cycle, we must see the skies beyond the sky: Shift our perspective, recognize that any happiness we seek based on transient worldly objects is illusory, and let our clinging die to make room for the lasting happiness found within.

When I began studying Buddhism, I learned a way to work with suffering: Act, and let the results come, whatever they may be. No one can take away this unshakable freedom of *zizai*. One small taste of this freedom beyond like that was enough to give me a new goal in life. At first, if I experienced one moment of freedom like that, I was lucky. After practicing for a while, I could feel it for a minute, maybe two. But I wanted infinitely more. I wanted to be like the Buddha, free twenty-four hours a day. My new goal was to become awakened in a single lifetime. I had some catching up to do.

CHAPTER 6

SEARCHING FOR NUMBER ZERO





All my life, I've looked for shortcuts. As a young martial artist, I wanted to do seven hundred repetitions but get the benefit of a thousand. As a young film actor, I wanted to break out of the Asian market into the Hollywood market with as few films as possible. And when I became passionate about Buddhism in the late nineties, I began to focus all my energy on the quickest possible path to enlightenment. I applied the same kind of thinking to my new goal: How can I do three months of practice but get the result of a year's worth? I watched the Tibetan lamas: It was as though they'd gone to Buddhist boarding school. In my view, they'd been training nonstop since they were five years old, practicing eight hours a day, just as I'd done with martial arts. Now they were thirty and they'd been practicing for twenty-five years. How could I possibly catch up? How can I study more efficiently? There must be some way I could use three years, or ten years, to complete what they did in twenty-five.

Despite my desperation for enlightenment, the path to true freedom can be painfully slow. The Mahayana Buddhist canon teaches that it will take "three incalculable eons" or kalpas to achieve enlightenment. The Buddha illustrates the beginning of a kalpa as an enormous mountain, larger than Mount Everest. If every hundred years, a silk scarf is wiped across the mountain, a kalpa will not end even when the mountain is worn down. And it will take three of these to become enlightened. Enduring three kalpas was unacceptable to me.

I found solace in the stories of great spiritual masters, all kinds of people who, despite all obstacles, achieved enlightenment in a single lifetime. I loved reading about the life of Lao-tzu, the legendary author of the *Tao Te Ching*, and the Sixth Chan Patriarch, who didn't even know how to read. Milarepa was an even more miraculous case, as he killed many people in his youth yet achieved Buddhahood in one lifetime. If the Buddha is said to have taught 84,000 paths to enlightenment, there must be one that fits my ambitions.

In the winter of 2003, I went on my first extended Buddhist meditation retreat, a Zen sesshin led by the renowned Master Shengyen. Most sects of Buddhism emphasize a step-by-step practice that resembles a conventional educational process: Grade school comes first, then high school, college, and graduate studies. Buddhist training has equivalents to all these stages. There are all kinds of preliminaries to complete before moving on to higher inquiries and insights. But Zen Buddhism, in my view, was the only sect that offered sudden enlightenment, called *dun wu* in Chinese. Sudden enlightenment was very attractive for shortcut-seekers.

In 2003, Vincent's godmother Sister May, who had been studying with Master Shengyen for a long time, invited me to Taiwan to hold a public talk with the Master. Before agreeing, I made a sincere request: "Please give me one day to ask Master Shengyen for help with my own practice. I really want to achieve enlightenment."

My private meeting was scheduled for the day before our public forum. Because I was at a peak in my film career, the media buzzed about our meeting, and we were being swarmed by reporters chasing us for interviews. When I finally got to be alone with him, I quickly raised my core question: "How can I achieve enlightenment in the shortest time? Do you have a spe-

cial secret?” Just as I had imagined masters of martial arts with the secrets to powerful techniques living in the mountains when I was younger, I now imagined that Buddhist masters had powerful secrets that could grant instant enlightenment.

Master Shengyen gave me a curious answer. “You are now standing at the edge of the cliff,” he said. “If you take one more step forward, you will become enlightened. It’s like you are standing in front of a paper window and you can easily pierce the paper with your hands.” Hearing exactly what I had secretly hoped for, I felt the excitement bubbling in me.

“What should I do?” I asked.

The master answered, “Give me ten days and I can help you.”

I agreed immediately.

The master continued, “This winter, I will be teaching a retreat of ten days of silent meditation at the Dharma Drum Retreat Center in New York. I invite you to join me and participate.”

I flushed with anticipation. The invitation felt so irresistible that I rearranged all my plans to attend. I was going to make good on my appointment with enlightenment no matter what.

At the end of November 2003, my assistant Vincent and I reported to the center in upstate New York. The retreat entailed ten days of silence without making eye contact with fellow retreatants. Tired of promoting films and answering empty interview questions, I felt safe. Here, nobody bothered me. The other attendees didn’t care at all who Jet Li was. They were here to meditate, just like me.

The formality and rigid rules are the backbone of the Zen sesshin. The first stick of incense must be burned at five a.m. every day. One stick of incense lasts for a meditation period of about 45 minutes, followed by a short rest. From early in the

morning until ten-thirty p.m. at night, the participants spend almost all their time in formal silent meditation. In addition to practice periods, Master Shengyen taught for two hours each day. The only breaks from practice were three simple meals, work periods at the jobs we were assigned such as kitchen duty or bathroom cleaning, and sleep. Everyone eats the same meals, sleeps on the same floor, observes the same schedule, and takes turns washing the dishes and cleaning the toilets, without exception. I craved enlightenment, but I had also grown accustomed to a certain politeness in how I was treated, as well as a certain luxury in my lifestyle. The Zen retreat was like my life as a successful film actor had been turned upside down. I will admit that at first I found it very uncomfortable.

For the first seven days, my struggle was terrible. I fought against the harsh conditions of the retreat and against my own discomfort with them. I carried huge expectations of a dramatic liberation from the very bonds of life and death. Faced instead with the humble tasks of sitting still and scrubbing toilets, I suffered. For all my passion for renunciation, I had in some ways only redirected my ego's ambitions away from worldly success and toward Buddhist success. Also, most of my experience with Buddhist practice up to that point was in the Tibetan lineage, which uses rich chanting and ornate rituals to bring one's heart into practice. Now in the austere Zen temple, I was instructed just to sit on the bare mat with my back straight. Essentially, doing nothing. Soon I was at a loss. By the end of the first day, my back ached. The next morning, the ache remained, only increasing throughout the retreat.

In the world I knew, if I worked more—practiced more kicks, filmed more scenes, signed more deals—I *must* get some of the results I desired. But in the retreat, it didn't work that way. Even if you work hard, you may not get anything.

Working hard may even be a hindrance. Practice has its own way of unfolding that can feel entirely illogical at first. You may even do everything “right” and get nothing; or you may do nothing and discover an insight. When I entered the sesshin, I assumed I could will my way into a direct revelation of truth. Instead, I felt more like I’d entered the hall of mirrors in a carnival: My expectation was shattered into countless fragments, each one relative and impossible to grasp. This perplexity was an early glimpse into the spacious mind beyond the self.

Although my enthusiasm for Buddhism was genuine and my desire to be liberated from suffering was sincere, I still brought a lot of my old self-centered thinking to my early practice. I still wanted to be successful and powerful, only now I wanted to be a special Buddhist rather than a special movie star. Essentially, I had tried to trade worldly hooks for spiritual ones. The Tibetan master Chögyam Trungpa coined a term to describe this: “spiritual materialism.” He defined it as the tendency of practitioners to use spiritual practices, beliefs, and experiences to reinforce the ego rather than transcend it. This subtle form of self-deception can hinder genuine spiritual growth and give rise to a false sense of superiority. Where I had previously been hooked by my desires for wealth and fame, now I was caught by seeking the most distinguished master and undergoing the rarest initiations.

The first few days of the retreat were without personal guidance, and I began to experience doubt. How could I possibly get enlightened in ten days? I started to wonder if Master Shengyen had tricked me, or worse, that I had been cheated by a spiritual swindler. Had I really left behind my film work and my family for this?

After three days, my mind started to settle. One afternoon I walked outside and saw something strange. A bird was flying

through the cloudless sky, but it didn't look right. The flight of the bird wasn't happening in a continuous, fluid motion like a film; instead, it was skipping across the sky in a series of still images, as if I were watching the flight path of the bird as a sequence of slides clicking past one by one in a viewfinder. I stood there transfixed, wondering if all the sitting and straining in the meditation hall had distorted my vision. After staring at the bird in the sky for many minutes, I realized the opposite was true: For the first time in my life, my vision was clear.

Most of the time, our eyes automatically fill in the connective tissue between the images we see, giving the illusion of continuous motion as in a film. Rarely do we slow down enough to see the series of still images that our eyes actually register. That afternoon on the retreat, I was seeing each point in the flight of the bird without the middle that provides continuity and makes it a movie.

As a movie actor, I was highly aware of the incongruity between the process of filming and the final product audiences see on-screen. I knew about the thin wires we used to help us perform acrobatic stunts, and the booming sound effect added to a harmless punch to make the blow appear devastating. I knew that the countless hours of tape would be edited, treated for color, and given a soundtrack to direct the emotions. By the time viewers watched the film, the raw materials would be so transformed and heightened as to be unrecognizable. This was the magic.

However, it had never occurred to me that my mind was creating a movie from the raw materials of my senses. My mind, it turned out, was constantly editing, speeding up, slowing down, filling in, coloring, transforming, and distorting the data from my senses. Sometimes this was in the interest of efficiency; other times the movie magic was in the service of my

ego, as when a memory of a painful interaction where I felt wronged was given brilliant Technicolor and blaring sound it surely lacked in reality. *What else am I missing?* I wondered. Unless you see through the illusion that life is a movie, you'll always be bumping into the other actors—and often the props. Everything depends on perspective.

This truth came alive for me as a spiritual insight a couple of days later. When I entered the retreat, my mind was lost in vast speculations and tangled ideas. I obsessed over paradoxes I had encountered in my reading. Some books said there is just one Buddha. Others said there are five Buddhas. Some said you cannot count how many Buddhas there are in the universe.

Finally I invoked Manjushri, to whom my grandmother taught me to pray. *Manjushri!* I thought in my heart. *Just tell me the truth! Is it one or is it many?*

Then in my mind, I saw softly flowing water that formed a huge statue of a Buddha. The Buddha was solid like crystal but formed by the water's movement.

Ah! I thought. *That's one. That's the truth.*

Then the Buddha began to move. And I saw many, many, many Buddhas stretching behind it and ahead of it and in all directions.

Okay! I thought. *There are many. That's the truth.*

Then it shifted back to one and I suddenly understood: From this perspective, it's one; from that perspective, it's many. If you want to see one, there's one; if you want to see many, there's many. But it's not one, and it's not many. Everything depends on perspective.

Of course the image was, in the end, a creation of my own mind. Not everyone will see the same image. But the image helped me persist on the retreat, because I felt I was beginning to move, even in the smallest increments, from a theoretical

understanding of Buddhist truth to an understanding rooted in my own experience.

I shared my vision with one of the younger Zen priests administering the retreat through the traditional written question-and-answer method. He came to my room and told me, “This is a Zen temple. Don’t bring Tibetan tantric visualizations into it. Just practice being.”

I was really frustrated. In the past, when I shared questions or insights with my teachers, they responded eagerly. Now, a younger man who wasn’t even the master I admired was denying the one thing that was sustaining my practice. By the fourth day, I worried I wouldn’t become enlightened at all.

My disgruntled mood continued until the seventh day. Although I was disturbed in my heart, I continued to follow the practice instructions. Then I gave up. I said to myself, *Forget everything. This was all a mistake. I came to the wrong place. I was cheated.*

In my exhaustion and frustration, I forgot all about the expectations I carried and just sat with my experience. At last I didn’t cling to anything. Everything dropped away and I was left with only the longing to know the Buddha inside myself.

Gradually an image emerged. I seemed to see myself as a person looking in agitation for enlightenment but unable to find it. Everything he does is in vain. I tried to describe the feeling in an anecdote.

There is a team of ten people sitting in a circle. Everyone’s shirt is marked with a number. I stand up and ask number 1 to my right, “Where is zero?”

He says, “Next to me.”

I go to the next person and ask, “Where is zero?”

He also says, “Next to me.”

I go to the next person, and the next, down the line until number 8, who says, “Two down.”

I walk two down, past number 9, but then I hit number 1 again. I ask number 1 again, “Where is zero?”

He gets impatient and says, “Didn’t I just tell you? Next to me.”

I feel annoyed that all these guys are playing with me. Then I look down. *I’m* wearing number 0! Because I, frantically searching outside, had never looked down at the simple answer inside myself.

Although, through my studies, I thought I understood what it meant for Buddha-nature to be inherent, the words finally settled in me. My fervent external search would inevitably result in suffering. I could become my own boss only by looking within.

I wrote down my vision and gave it to Vincent, who gave it to the assistant master.

“Not Zen!” he said. “This is just some Tibetan craziness.”

But after writing down my story, I found that I had finally calmed down when I returned to my seat. I could sit quietly, not looking at the scenery outside, not caring about time and space. The last two days passed very quickly.

At the end of the retreat, Master Shengyen appeared before us for the final time. In the very last minutes, he said, “I have a story.”

“Imagine there is a team of ten people sitting in a circle...” he began.

As I realized he was sharing my story, I felt a sudden warmth in the center of my chest. *He understands what I’m feeling!* I thought. *I finally understood something!* The joy and pride rose into my face and my mouth curled into a soft, private smile.

The other students could relate, too. They had also gone from meditation center to meditation center, and from master to master, searching for something outside themselves.

But Master Shengyen didn't tell anyone that this story was from Jet Li. He just wanted to tell the story. He didn't even look at me while he told it. However, unlike when my red donation envelope full of 1,000 yuan for Lho Kunsang Rinpoche disappeared among the others, this time I didn't feel the need for public recognition of my contribution.

With that, the retreat was over. Shedding my role as a retreatant, I stepped outside. Snow was falling; the air was freezing. Some distance ahead, a small group of volunteers washed bowls. The sight of their humble labor out in the snow touched me deeply. I burst into tears and cried and cried. I finally understood the answer to a question that I had carried for a long time: How can a little bit of practice help millions of people? I had read and had heard many teachers saying that if a practitioner just lights a little incense or makes a small offering or washes a bowl, it will generate good karma for many, many people.

"How can it be?" I asked myself.

When I first heard the teaching, I thought it was a nice idea from 2,500 years ago, but inapplicable today. In this moment, though, I felt the truth of the teaching in my bones. If one person washes dishes as a sincere expression of their fervor for awakening, they allow a hundred people to meditate. And if one of those hundred people becomes a Buddha, perhaps not even in this lifetime, that Buddha will benefit countless beings. Those beings will help more people, and in a million lifetimes, that one person's simple act of washing dishes will surely help a million people. I saw these acts of selfless service extending out into the time beyond like a lamp in the darkness.

We're often stuck in a limited view of time. We think only about a hundred years ago or a hundred years in the future. But the Buddha taught that we are unable to calculate the impact of a small act of service with our constrained understanding of time. We do what we can, anticipating results we can observe immediately, without seeing how great our influence can be. This is the time scale of beyond life and death.

Finally, I thought to myself, the teaching is close to me. I believed I was important, and that my life is the center of everything, but I'm just a little part of something very big.

The human words for this are very circumscribed. It encompasses many feelings all at once: gratitude, relief, humility, bittersweetness. As the Buddha taught, "Dharma felt with the heart is far beyond what words can describe."

All the teachings in my books could not compare to what I learned from the tears I cried that day.

• • •

ALTHOUGH I WAS IMPATIENT TO continue my search for true freedom, I still carried doubts. I wanted to make sure there were living masters who had succeeded in their pursuit of freedom. Otherwise, wasn't this all just a waste of time? The sutras taught that when a practitioner becomes a bodhisattva, a person who has truly devoted themselves to the awakening of all sentient beings, there will be no discrimination. Taken literally, this means there will be no difference to them whether they eat noodles or nails, or whether they drink water or urine. I was determined to find out if anyone had really cultivated themselves to this level.

I began asking all my masters, "Are there any practitioners in the world who are true bodhisattvas?" My teachers reminded me that one's level of realization should not be revealed, so

we can proceed only by reason and faith. When I persisted, they smiled bitterly at the proof I demanded and the conditions I set on my practice. My future master Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro told me that in his heart of hearts, he believed the Karmapa was a bodhisattva. Secretly, I resolved then to go and visit this living bodhisattva and assess his achievements for myself.

Shortly afterward, I flew with a friend directly to New Delhi from Hong Kong. After a night in New Delhi, we made the twelve-hour drive to Dharamshala. That night, we arranged to meet with the 17th Karmapa at the Gyuto Tantric Monastery the next day. Tibetan Buddhists believe that after the death of their bodies, certain masters choose to reincarnate in a new body to continue alleviating suffering. The Karmapa was the 17th reincarnation in his unbroken Karma Kagyu lineage, dating back to the twelfth century. I was very grateful to the Karmapa for taking the time to meet with me and honored for the chance to share my journey with him.

When I stood before him, though, I was confused. First of all, he was younger than I was. In Asian cultures, age is very meaningful. When I envisioned a wise master in possession of arcane knowledge, especially a Tibetan one, I pictured a wizened old man, not a fresh-faced youth who appeared barely out of his boyhood. On top of that, he was fluent in Mandarin and guilelessly curious about my life, peppering me with questions about my films. I had expected to be the one asking all the questions and receiving the answers, but instead, after our formal meeting, we had a long, wide-ranging conversation ranging from city versus country life, to the burden of others' expectations, to our meticulously curated collections of Buddhist art and artifacts. A mutual affinity formed.

Eventually, though, my own curiosity overtook me. Like the young boy reaching for his bodyguard's gun, I abandoned all

sense of politeness and boldly asked him, “Are you a bodhisattva? Is there no difference for you between drinking water and drinking urine?”

Here I was, asking one of the most revered spiritual leaders in the world whether he could drink pee.

He smiled and shook his head. “I can’t say that. Although I have the title of Karmapa and am recognized as the reincarnation of a long lineage, I’m still young and have a lot to learn. I’m working very hard to live up to my title. Although I don’t have that level of discrimination now, I believe the past Karmapa did have the enlightenment of a bodhisattva.”

The time allotted to us in the Karmapa’s highly structured schedule ended, and we agreed to continue our conversation the following day. At our next meeting, I told him, “I want to transcend the cycle of death and rebirth and find true freedom. Should I go into formal retreat?”

He said, “I don’t think that is a suitable path for you right now. You should continue to practice hard in the world. You must complete your film career, and you need to keep looking inside yourself. Eventually, you will find the answer.”

Another Buddhist master telling me not to retire from film!

I came to understand that for all of his lofty status, the Karmapa’s life was intensely constrained. I thought I suffered from the relentless scrutiny directed at me as a film star, but the expectations he lived under were an even greater burden. He had his own heavy hooks to work with. Perhaps I was blessed with a kind of freedom of motion I hadn’t appreciated.

I asked for his help, and on the third day of our visit, I took refuge, sheltering from the suffering of existence by ceremonially acknowledging the Dharma as the true path to freedom. The Karmapa said, “Last night, an old Chinese man gave me a name in my dream. When I woke up, I translated the name

into Tibetan as Karma Nyingjei Bu, which means ‘Son of Compassion.’ Please take this as your Dharma name now that you have taken refuge.”

I was dumbfounded. Normally, getting a Dharma name is not necessarily such a big deal. It’s just another identity, illusory and impermanent. But the magnitude of this name, transmitted through dream, was a daunting responsibility.

Wow! I thought. How will I live up to this?

As we spoke, I scrutinized him, watching every gesture carefully. He was younger than I was, yet he held himself with dignity and poise. What surprised me most of all was that I saw myself in him. *Why am I seeing myself in what I’m seeking?* I wondered. *I thought I was trying to attain enlightenment by escaping myself.* I had come to him assuming that a completely free being would look and behave completely differently from me. But once I let down all the distortions of my mind and saw him as he was, I recognized a kind of mirror, redirecting my attention back to the O on my own shirt. The Karmapa wasn’t going to help me become free by bestowing some lofty, esoteric blessing on me from his great unreachable height; that would be just another form of spiritual materialism, an inflation by association. Rather, he helped me—as he helped everyone who sought him out and paid their respects—by embodying and reflecting back the capacity for boundless compassion that arises naturally from the mirrorlike state of zizai. Each of us is a child of compassion, struggling to remember our birthright like a diamond in the mud and to live up to our title with our behavior.

Up until that point, my spiritual journey had been a mostly private matter, never involving more than a few close friends and teachers. Now the Karmapa had informed me that I had a significant role to play in the larger scheme. It was a call to ac-

tion. The name Son of Compassion planted itself very deep in my heart, long before I knew how to realize it. All I knew then was that I wanted to change so that I could do whatever I could to help other beings.

• • •

AFTER MY SEASON IN HOLLYWOOD, my life shifted back to Asia, and in 2004, I moved to Shanghai. Lho Kunsang Rinpoche often came to my home to teach. During this time, he taught me a series of advanced meditation practices that involved complex visualizations. But I struggled to understand what he was trying to teach. The lama who was providing Tibetan-Mandarin translation, his language competency stretched to its limits, was finding it difficult to convey the subtleties of the master's teaching.

Rinpoche concluded, "It's time to find you a guru who speaks fluent Mandarin to lead you on from here."

Rinpoche entrusted me to the teacher he believed would be best suited to my capabilities and aspirations. Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro is one of the most prominent scholars of Tibetan Buddhism and the Dharma heir to Khenchen Jigme Phuntsok, who was said to have had ten thousand students by the end of his life. Khenpo is an honorific title that is roughly equivalent to a PhD in Buddhist philosophy. Trained at the famous Larung Gar Buddhist Academy in Sichuan, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro rose to become the vice principal. After he accepted the entrustment of my practice, Khenpo arranged to visit Shanghai for a week to teach me the Dharma. I was excited to share my practice with my new teacher. In my mind, I had made incredible progress! I thought I knew many great secrets and esoteric revelations. My spiritual materialism flaring up, I told him about my discovery of Buddhism in 1997, listed every Buddhist

book I had read, reported in detail every master I followed, every initiation and special teaching I had received, every pilgrimage I had walked, and every retreat I had sat.

Khenpo listened patiently to my monologue, smiled, and said, “Very good, very good.”

Assuming he was impressed by the depth and breadth of my practice, I asked him, “Where should we start from now?”

I expected him to name another highly refined and advanced practice. Instead, he said, “Start from the beginning. Go back to the Four Outer Preliminaries.”

For a moment, I thought I had heard him wrong. The Four Outer Preliminaries are foundational practices designed to prepare the practitioner for more advanced meditative work. I considered them child’s play. It was as if I had come to a great professor expecting to start college calculus, and he was telling me to go back to kindergarten to learn addition. There must be some mistake. Start from scratch? With all my qualifications? I didn’t see the value of going back to basics.

I was afraid he might have misunderstood my speech, so I introduced myself again in even more detail. I listed the empowerments I had received over the past seven years and again recited the titles of the hundreds of Buddhist books I’d read. I described the phowa transmission I received at the Bamai Monastery in Qinghai, and all the practices I had completed under Lho Kunsang Rinpoche.

Khenpo listened patiently to everything I said, the gentle smile never leaving his face.

But when I asked him again where we should start learning, his answer was the same: “Start from the Four Outer Preliminaries.”

Even then, I didn’t give up. I spent several days of his precious visit explaining to him over and over again all my

qualifications.

But he always answered the same. “Start with the Four Outer Preliminaries.”

When I pressed him for an explanation, he said, “Your practice is mainly theoretical. You have been exposed to many Buddhist concepts and read a lot, but how much have you really experienced for yourself? If the Four Outer Preliminary practices are not stable, the following Five Inner Preliminaries will also be unstable. If these preliminary practices aren’t cultivated well, it will be like trying to build on a wobbly foundation; the structure will collapse. So you need to go back to the beginning.”

Over those five days, I protested Khenpo’s instructions. I argued, reasoned, and pleaded. I was like a young martial artist coming at his master with everything he had, failing to land a single blow. Gradually, I started to feel the obstinate knot inside me starting to untangle. *Okay*, I thought. *Maybe this is a new beginning*. Begrudgingly, I saw how shot through my practice had been with illusions. I was chasing rare and unusual achievements—how to leave one’s body in the moment of death, how to drink pee like water, how to become completely free in a single human lifetime. As my perspective shifted, I saw how, in my earlier practice, it was as if I’d been visiting a series of magic shows, captivated by the special effects, without ever seeing through the trick.

In a sense, I was padding my résumé to make myself look more impressive than I was because I couldn’t yet trust that I was number zero. My accomplishments in truly embodying the freedom I sought looked paltry and fragile under the gaze of my teacher. To preserve my pride, I tried to substitute brittle stories for the genuine zizai that comes from unflappable confidence in one’s true nature. It was like I was standing with my

teacher in a movie theater pointing to the hero I played on-screen, with all his dazzling flashiness enhanced in postproduction, and saying, “That’s me,” while my teacher smiled and asked, “Who are you, really?” Sometimes you need a lot of encouragement to have the humility to admit where you’re actually starting from.

When I was ready to listen, Khenpo taught me the Four Outer Preliminaries, step by step. Although my mind rebelled at first, I started to seek firsthand experience of truth over intellectual understanding. Little by little, I learned to question the movie of my mind, to see the bird’s flight in its skipping progression of still images. My arrogant and grandiose self-image as an advanced practitioner who already knew everything fell away as I admitted how much I still had to learn. That day my teacher insisted I go back to the beginning, my practice deepened. The focus of my meditation became the simplest building blocks of experience: breath, sensation, change. I returned to kindergarten and learned to stack each moment like a colored block, one by one.

To recognize ourselves as number zero is a twisting journey. We discover, often by running around chasing every shiny thing until we’re exhausted and disillusioned, that there is no answer to our deepest longing to be free to be found except within ourselves. After years of troubled searching, we may be humbled by just how little progress we’ve made on what really matters. We may want to boast, or turn back, or sink into despair—we refuse to let the past die. This is the moment to go back to basics. True understanding is built steadily, slowly, moment to moment, from the most fundamental building blocks. This revelation is both a relief and a responsibility. To realize we’re number zero is also to touch the part of life we share with all others, because each of us is the number zero of

our own life, and each of us is a child of compassion called to act for others.

As I prepared to celebrate the winter holidays in 2004, I had made some progress on my path, but I still held on to many of my old beliefs. I was in a momentous transition, waiting for something to push me over the edge into a new way of being in the world. Before I could truly devote myself to serving other beings, the old Jet Li would have to die, humbled by the uncontrollable power of nature itself.

CHAPTER 7

BE A GRANDSON TO THE WORLD





In the winter of 2004, our family had made plans to go to the Maldives for our vacation. We set off from Hong Kong on Christmas Day, passed through Thailand, and arrived at the Four Seasons in the Maldives that night. I had heard that the islands might gradually be submerged due to rising sea levels, so I wanted to seize the opportunity to visit it while we still had a chance. The resort we stayed in was on a coral island, and we had our own overwater bungalow on stilts. Our teak patio was embraced all around by brilliantly white sandy beaches and blue water like shining sapphires. I watched the waves slowly coming and going and the endless line of sea and sky gleaming in the distance. At night, the gentle splash of the water just below us against the stilts lulled us to sleep.

On our first morning, my two younger daughters, aged four and one, wanted to play in the ocean. Our babysitter helped them put on their swimsuits, and we all went down to the beach. Standing in the water while my daughters splashed and laughed, I saw huge waves in the distance. I thought, *What happened to the sea?*

The first wave hit the beach, and the tourists sunbathing on the sand immediately got up, picked up their overturned items, and rushed back to the hotel. The waves came again, and this time the water covered the top of my feet. A real tsunami is nothing like in the movies. Without warning, the ocean quickens, and waves start whipping in suddenly. Panic simmered in me. The water was too high, too fast. My daughters seemed too

small, too vulnerable, too easily at the mercy of the gathering waters. My older daughter was still playing in the water, so I picked her up and asked our babysitter to carry my younger daughter while we prepared to go back. When I turned around to give the now-unrecognizable ocean a cursory glance, another wave hurtled toward us, and the water reached my knees. Spinning around, I looked back again. There was no beach. No hotel. Nothing. I was just standing in the ocean. There was no way back. The tranquil, turquoise paradise had turned into a menacing nightmare.

Another wave hit, and the water reached my hips. I held my daughter in my arms and arduously waded through the water. I took the first step, then the second step. The waves climbed higher and higher. Now the water was waist-deep. The shifting and unstable currents threw me off-balance. When I took another step forward, the seawater hit me unexpectedly with a brutal barrage of strikes. It was like fighting an opponent of incredible power, size, and speed, coming from multiple directions and overwhelming me. Now the water was up to my neck, nearly at my chin. I hoisted my daughter up to sit on my shoulders. I looked back and saw our babysitter gagging, her mouth full of water.

Then a huge wave crashed over us and washed my younger daughter and our babysitter over twenty feet away. Salt stung my throat as my mouth hung open in shock. The water had scooped up my tiny child and flung her farther into the ocean. I lunged forward, but I could barely move. Dizziness spun my vision and terror chilled my skin.

In anguish, I started crying out, “Help! Help!” gargling seawater between shouts.

One more wave, and that’s it, I thought.

A thought flashed in my mind: *Avalokiteśvara!* I called out to the bodhisattva of compassion, *Please, help me face the danger of this situation. If I survive this time, I will change my life.*

With total clarity, I was aware that the distance between life and death was only four inches between the rising water and my lips. *If another wave comes, my daughter and I will drown.* Ready myself to absorb the impact of another battering wave, I planted my feet and gripped my daughter's knees tightly to keep her from slipping off my shoulders. I kept blinking, but the water bit at my eyes, blurring my sight. I heard the water surging all around me, felt the urgent pull of the tide sliding past my ankles. *This is it.*

When I was younger, I competed against many fighters who were older and stronger than I was. Before I mastered my skills and learned to beat larger and more experienced opponents, I lost—repeatedly. There was always a moment in those early matches when I knew that I was outmatched and couldn't win. I felt the defeat in my heart before I felt my rival's final blow.

Now the ocean was my adversary, and I felt its primordial power. All my skill meant nothing. I was beaten. Sorrow for my daughter's life tore at my chest. I braced myself, preparing for the end.

And then the waves stopped surging.

I looked around frantically and saw that the shore had appeared again. Fortunately, when we came to the beach, several staff members from the hotel had come down with us because they wanted to take a photo. When they saw our babysitter get knocked over and carried away, they rushed into the water and rescued her and my younger daughter. I sloshed through the water toward them and was overcome with gratitude. My eyes, raw and stinging, now filled with their own salty tears. As my

sunken heart leapt up, my limbs warmed with joy and relief. I threw my arms around my sobbing daughter and held her close to me. When I looked down, I noticed that my forearms were covered with blood, the skin torn by shards of broken furnishings and structural elements from the hotel.

Although the situation was critical, the tsunami did not seem to be getting worse at that moment. I tried my best to avoid the furniture and sundries floating in the sea and slowly marched toward the hotel step by step.

When I returned to the lobby, I saw everyone soaked from the water, panicking and agitated. The scene was out of a movie. There were about two hundred people gathered in the wreckage of the lobby, which was full of seawater and detritus. The hotel staff was counting people and assessing who was missing. I reported that I hadn't seen my wife yet, so they sent someone out in a rowboat to look for her among the wreckage of the bungalows. The staff took stock of the hotel provisions and determined there was enough freshwater and food on the island for at least three to five days. If the outside world knew we were in distress, we had a chance to be saved.

The hotel staff called the headquarters of Four Seasons Hotels Limited in Canada for help through a newly installed satellite phone. Only then did they learn that much of South Asia had been hit by the tsunami. The devastation had hit fourteen countries, from Indonesia to Sri Lanka to Thailand, and the casualties were incalculable. We learned later that the tsunami was the result of an undersea megathrust earthquake with a seismic magnitude of 9.2–9.3, the most powerful ever recorded in Asia. The waves reached up to 30 meters (100 feet) in height and ravaged the communities along the coasts, killing almost 228,000 people. It was one of the deadliest natural dis-

asters in recorded history and the deadliest in the twenty-first century.

Having lived through the Tangshan earthquake in 1976 and the San Francisco earthquake in 1989, I knew to evacuate to open ground during an earthquake. But this was different. I stood in the middle of a tsunami, crashing waves paralyzing me. With nowhere to hide, I faced the futility of scrambling for worldly power. The flimsy continuity of consciousness I called Jet Li had never been permanent. When faced with the indomitable and unpredictable force of nature itself, human power means nothing. The ocean didn't care that I was a movie star or that I had wealth or that I was a martial arts champion. The waves were the colossal force of impermanence itself, stripping away everything I thought I was.

I waited anxiously while the staff searched for my wife. Every time a rowboat returned, I rushed out to greet her, but she wasn't there. Already struggling to console my terrified daughters, I imagined them going through life without their mother. Finally, after hours and hours, a boat came back, and she was on it. We embraced in the lobby, crying among the wreckage.

When I regained my senses, I noticed a commotion starting to flare up in the flooded lobby. The sounds of rising panic filled my ears, and I gathered from the murmuring that a second wave of the tsunami might be on its way, caused by an aftershock from the earthquake.

No one knew when it would come or how bad it would be. Because the first wave of the tsunami two hours earlier had come so suddenly, people did not have time to be afraid. But in the two hours that followed, uncertainty set in and steeped our minds as we waited and waited for another powerful deluge to destroy the remnants of what little safety we had found. My

heart was full of gratitude for the training in impermanence and compassion that allowed me to face this moment calmly.

Together, all the people in the lobby got organized and mobilized the manpower and resources we had to resist another flood. We gathered the lifesaving equipment and floating objects on hand and distributed them to women, children, and the elderly. We turned an inflatable float into a makeshift crib for my younger daughter, and I gently placed her in it, along with a bottle of water and a chocolate bar. On a damp piece of paper, I wrote that this was my daughter and begged whoever found her to save her.

The able-bodied men moved wooden tables, benches, and chairs together to make a barricade against the water. We started to practice what we would do if another wave hit. In concentric circles, young people with good physical fitness stood, arms linked, making an outer barrier, while those with weaker fitness stood in the inner circles, and the elderly and children huddled in the center. We had no other option but to use human walls to deflect the waves.

As we waited for the next round of water to come, I took in my surroundings. Among the two hundred people present, many different nationalities, races, languages, and socioeconomic situations were represented. And yet we all had a natural and innate consensus that priority should be given to caring for the elderly and the children. Everyone was willing to cooperate with the arrangements, even if it meant personal danger and discomfort. I saw the glorious altruistic side of human nature on display, capable of spontaneous sacrifice and compassion in the face of life and death.

Then someone shouted, "Here comes the water!" We quickly formed a circle according to our drill formation. Thankfully, the last wave just reached my ankles and was not nearly as se-

rious as we had feared. The hotel staff moved us to their own dormitory higher up on the land to rest. My wife and children slept, but I was wide awake. Adrenaline had electrified my nerves, and fear kept me vigilant. I started meditating.

I considered my life. Through the stark lens of my recent brush with death, my memories felt fresh. For the first time, I grasped how everything I did up until that point was for myself. I saw how I had wanted to prove myself as an athlete, to distinguish myself from other martial artists. I took in how badly I had wanted to know I was special, to achieve fame and power and security. Although I had been working so hard to represent martial arts, Chinese culture, and the film industry, ultimately my actions served me and my own basic needs. I felt how deeply I wanted to be safe, how firmly I believed money would make me safe, and how I worried all the time: *What if I can't work? What if my skill doesn't cut it? What happens if I can't make a living?* And I saw how even when I began my journey with Buddhism, I acted from my desire to satisfy my need for safety.

This is what I call the small self: limited, self-centered, hooked and pulled every which way by unexamined desires, unaware of its interconnectedness with the rest of life. This is not freedom, but boundness—the tight lines of my body, extending only as far as my arms can reach and grasp. Wincing, I perceived how I had been acting from delusion, living in the movie of a little man called Jet Li, wasting the gift of my precious human life. The small self is like a small bowl of water. If someone sprinkles even a little dirt into the bowl, the water will be dirty. In the same way, when our mind is untrained and something happens that we don't like, we start to suffer immediately and get angry, demanding, *Why did that happen? Whose fault is it?*

Originally, I had hoped to retire at sixty to focus on meditating and volunteering to give back to society and repay it for everything it had given me. At the time of the tsunami, I was forty-one. My awareness of impermanence had crashed over my life with the suddenness of an unexpected wave. I knew I couldn't wait until I was sixty. For years I had been reading and chanting about the fragility and preciousness of life, but my knowledge was theoretical. That night I felt the truth of impermanence in my marrow. Human life and death are so fragile, a small space between breaths. This was the start of my genuine renunciation.

If I survive tonight, I thought to myself, I will change my life, because the old Jet Li is already dead.

The small self of my earlier life that acted on self-centered desires was gone, washed away with all the other losses of the tsunami. I was glimpsing my big self, the expansive mind that opens up so we can carry other people's concerns as our own, acutely aware of our interwovenness in the fabric of life. The bounds of the big self don't stop with our own bodies; instead, the big self innately seeks to ease the suffering of all beings and align its personal desires with the greater good. Compared with the small self, the big self is like a swimming pool. If someone sprinkles a small amount of dirt into the swimming pool, it won't spoil the water. Even if a child pees a little into the pool, the water is still fine to swim in. In this way, if our mind is trained and something happens, we have much more space to relate to it. We can come back to our breath, adjust our perspective, and remember our intention to act with compassion. Cultivating the insight of the big self is the first step toward freeing yourself from the small self.

With relief, I decided not to follow my original plan. I needed to start loving and caring for the world now. I would do

everything I could to help people. My earlier spirit of renunciation, born out of a personal desire for *me* to be free from *my* hooks, began to settle into a motivation of true compassion. This was the real start for me of what the Buddha calls *karunā*, the heartfelt desire to liberate beings from suffering.

From this spacious perspective, I saw how painfully small our perception of human life often is. Usually, people focus on themselves, thinking of nothing but *Me, me, me*. Each person thinks, “I’m more important than everyone else.” I had been like that, too. In the bigger picture, the same is true for countries. People from the United States think, *Our country is the wealthiest and most influential, so we are the most important people in the world*. People from China think, *Our country has a long and noble history; we are the most important people in the world*. And so on, from Europe to Africa to South America and all around the world. Each one thinks it’s more important than the others. But of course they are all essential to the whole. If every country acts independently, disasters will occur.

My experience of the tsunami and of uniting with other humans to face it taught me that human beings need one another, and we must cooperate with one another to be complete. In that moment, I imagined how I would answer if aliens visited from outer space.

“Who are you?” they ask.

“A human being,” I answer.

“Where do you live?”

“Earth.”

Humanity is one, and we share the earth as our home. It is all one ecosystem. If each of us does a little, we are all better off. This became my purpose.

• • •

AFTER THE TSUNAMI, I WANTED to start an organization rooted in compassion to help people suffering from natural disasters like the one I had survived. This was a vast undertaking, and I had no idea how to approach it. At first the process felt so complex. Then a memory from my previous practice returned to me. I again found guidance in one of the names given to me by a master: Son of Compassion.

Like other times when I'm lost, I meditated and prayed to my guide: "Manjushri! How do I express the compassion I feel for others? How do I help people? How can I convince millions of people, and multimillion-dollar corporations, and whole governments? I don't know how to do it."

Then a feeling arose very strongly. It had three parts: body, speech, and heart.

Body: Use the sword of your body to cut through all the rules.

Speech: Use your words to tell your people your belief.

Heart: Use your own heart to unite with other hearts.

It was so simple. I already had all the resources I needed to begin.

Manjushri is an example of a bodhisattva, a compassionate being who vows to attain enlightenment not just for themselves, but for the liberation of all. Their compassion is active, not passive. The path of the bodhisattva transforms personal suffering into universal liberation. Although I'd been praying to Manjushri since my grandmother first taught me how, I'd always held the notion of a bodhisattva as an abstract concept.

Now my practice was guiding me inwardly to take up the mantle and embody the ideal me with my own behavior in my own worldly life.

Gradually, the idea of a foundation that would give everyone an opportunity to do their best for the common good formed. Rather than taking large donations from wealthy philanthropists or corporations, the approach would be to raise small amounts of money from large numbers of participants. Just as the practice of awareness grows by observing one moment at a time, stacking one colored kindergarten block after another, this approach to philanthropy would grow by stacking small donations. Eventually this became expressed in our motto, “One Person, One Yuan, One Day.” I shared my inspiration with my wife, and she was supportive. We each donated a sum of money, half to the tsunami relief fund and half to One Foundation.

At the outset, I was nervous about my new endeavor. I’d never done anything like it, and my old habit of worrying intruded: *What if I don’t hit my target? What if no one understands?* I had to practice letting go of the result. If I have no target, then just doing the activity is better than not doing it.

If no one will listen to me, I thought, I can just walk state by state, city by city, and stand there taking pictures. If you want to take a picture with Jet Li, put 1 yuan in the pot.

It might be slow going, but I could still raise money.

The form and approach toward public welfare of One Foundation were unprecedented in China. From 2005 to 2006, while we were preparing to launch, I traveled to many countries, learned from many universities and charitable foundations, and consulted the practices of public welfare organizations around the world to create a model that would be suitable for China.

I remember visiting Harvard Business School during this time. I wanted to learn their techniques for raising money, so we had a symposium to discuss my project with the world-class fundraising experts on the faculty there. After talking for two hours, the moderators gave me this conclusion: “You don’t need to learn anything about raising money from Harvard. You’re following a totally different model from anything that’s been done before. Raising money from traditional funding sources and large companies is its own skill. But your belief in what you’re doing is contagious. You share your love with people, and then they will share what they have with others. We’ve never seen this style before.”

I was so excited. I said, “Oh, I know! It’s like a love-transmitted disease!”

Everybody laughed. Together we refined the language: “Make love go viral.”

In 2011, the One Foundation became the first privately initiated public fund in China. In the early days, the Jet Li One Foundation was established under the Red Cross Society of China due to regulatory restrictions. At first I didn’t want to put my name on it. The whole point was for this project *not* to serve my own name! But when I reflected on it more deeply, I saw that the fledgling foundation urgently needed public attention, and its association with me would reduce publicity costs. Although I had mixed feelings about my own fame, here was an opportunity to redirect it for the good of all beings. Still, I often say that the One Foundation without Jet Li is the real One Foundation.

Once I had Manjushri’s three principles to follow and a plan of action, I threw myself into service. I poured all my energy and passion into promoting my mission, and I wanted it to be as effective as possible. Everywhere I went, I repeated the sim-

ple philosophy of One Foundation to everyone I encountered. One by one, I recruited more volunteers. Just as I had flown around the world as a young martial artist spreading the glory of Chinese wushu, I now flew around spreading the message of altruism. I was like a public welfare evangelist, spreading the good word, urging everyone to donate 1 yuan a month for One Foundation.

One Foundation was officially established on April 19, 2007. There was only one staff member, Ms. Fan Na. We borrowed office space from my film production company and started operations with just a few tables and chairs. During those first two years, I had several films come out, including *The Warlords*, *The Forbidden Kingdom*, and *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor*. Any time I made any media appearance to promote the films in those days, I always seized the opportunity to spread the message of One Foundation. When the Beijing Olympics were held in 2008, I formed a series of partnerships with international sports brands, exchanging my endorsements for donations from the corporations. From there, I began seeking support and cooperation from a wide range of various sources across the worlds of entertainment, sports, fashion, and finance.

Early on, I had many critics. Before this phase of my activity, I heard mostly praise. When they talked about Jet Li, people said, “He’s a great guy! He promotes Chinese culture, he spreads wushu, we love his movies!” Now some people pushed back, saying, “Just go back to making movies! If you really want to help us, make another kung fu movie!”

Others, when they heard I was asking ordinary people for money, responded, “You’re the famous millionaire! You donate the money. Why are you asking me for one yuan? It’s just

twelve cents in US dollars. That's nothing for you, but it's something for me!"

That was exactly the point. My rationale went like this: If I donate my own money to help others, the merit of my actions will come back to me or, from a Buddhist point of view, to my karma. This is good for me, but it doesn't give anyone else a chance to accumulate merit and engage their own innate capacity to alleviate the suffering of others. I wanted to invite millions of people to participate in an opportunity to receive the benefit of their own compassionate behavior. If they donated even a small amount of their own money, the benefit would come back to them, to unite my heart with theirs. In simple terms, I could say, "If you help someone today, someday someone else will help you!" Moreover, if I personally put out my kind intention, that's just one person spreading a seed of kindness. But if 10 million people put out their kind intentions, that's 10 million seeds of kindness. Each person who donates will feel the goodness of helping others, which will inspire them to help more; and each person who receives help will want to pass along the good feeling to someone else in need. When those seeds sprout, the influence will reach much farther.

I got pushback from critics for my approach to philanthropy. They asked me, "You're starting a charity, so why are you working with the NBA? Why did you go to Disney? Why are you involving Versace? What does any of this have to do with disaster relief? A charity should raise funds in the traditional way."

But I remembered what Manjushri told me: "Use the sword of your body to break all the rules." So I went to everyone—singers, writers, actors, athletes, designers—asking them to become volunteers. People thought I was putting together some

kind of gala or spectacle. They hadn't ever seen charity like this. I also went to top consulting companies like Deloitte and Bain and McKinsey and told them, "This is what I believe. I don't have money to pay you. I hope you will join." I used my words and my heart to convey my passion, and many consultants and auditors were willing to sign on to pro bono work for the foundation. My contacts in the business world told me this was unheard of in China.

I saw the whole process with One Foundation as a chance to practice with my own mind. I got to watch my reaction to every fan who misunderstood my motivations, to every entrenched philanthropist resisting innovation, and to every skeptical CEO concerned only with the bottom line, and understand my own attachments to fame, propriety, and wealth more deeply. The Buddha taught about the eight worldly winds, which blow through life: praise and blame; gain and loss; fame and disrepute; pleasure and pain. These winds constantly arise and pass away beyond our control. If I try to cling to any of them or push any away, my emotions will fluctuate wildly, and I will suffer. Instead, I can practice letting go and facing each wind. I can ask myself, *Who is dissatisfied? Who is complaining? Who is clinging?* If my efforts are genuinely altruistic and come from the compassion in my heart, then any attacks coming at me are like bullets with no target.

Traveling the world in service of One Foundation, I underwent a significant shift in my identity. When I made my first movie, *The Shaolin Temple*, I played the lead role. In my film career, I always sat at the summit of the call sheet. Accustomed to receiving preferential treatment, I expected others to cater to my needs above everyone else's. Now I was humbling myself to learn from institutions and foundations; I was bowing down before everyone I met to recruit volunteers and beg for funds,

using my body to cut through my own rules of who I was and what society expected of me. I became the world's most famous beggar, begging governments, corporations, and individuals to support my idea.

Knowing that I was working to alleviate the suffering of others fulfilled me in a way that making films and winning competitions never had. Although as a film actor I'd worked tirelessly to put myself at the center, I found that I now relished being a small part of a vast undertaking. There's a Chinese insult: "pretend to be a grandson." Roughly, it means to play dumb or clueless, to act pitiful for an advantage. But when working on One Foundation, I found myself not pretending, but truly becoming that grandson, as I begged for the public's money, love, and compassion. By entering charity work, I embraced the identity of a grandson as it meant being demoted from movie star, no longer being the main event, stepping out of the center. The small Jet Li, who acted for his own benefit alone, was fraying away.

In my youth, I was baffled and intimidated by social life. I shunned parties, loathed small talk, and struggled to make eye contact. I'd go to a dance club and spend the whole night sitting in a corner, watching the others have fun. Magnifying small rejections and anxious about losing face, I rarely asked for help. Once I started working on One Foundation, acting in service of others broke me out of my shell. I could easily approach strangers, look them right in the eye, and share my ideas passionately. With newfound confidence and backbone, I addressed audiences of hundreds, many of whom were much more qualified on paper than I was. The experience changed my whole character. My cause was greater than me, and I found the door between me and the world flung open.

The transition from small self to big self is illustrated elegantly in my 2002 film *Hero*. This was my dream film. When I read the script, I cried—twice. In my twenty-two-year career of making movies, it was the first script that made me weep. Finally, I would have a chance to embody the depth of my spiritual inquiry on-screen. Even the story structure of *Hero* expresses interconnection: the action revolves around multiple retellings of the same events, each from a different character's perspective. As we learn a bit more with each telling, we see how understanding and meaning are shaped by interconnected viewpoints—no single perspective holds absolute truth.

The narrative centers around a plot by my character, called only Nameless, to assassinate an emperor in the Warring States period of ancient China. When the story opens, the emperor is using all the power at his disposal to unify the various independent kingdoms into a single nation. At first, Nameless is a single-minded killer determined to destroy a ruler he perceives as autocratic and corrupt. Gradually he comes to understand that if he just kills the emperor, another emperor will always sprout up in the previous one's place. Discord and disharmony will continue forever. The only way to stop the cycle and end the chaos of war is by changing the emperor's heart. As the two men debate, Nameless recognizes that the emperor's vision of a unified China will bring peace. His creed becomes Tianxia, "All Under Heaven," emphasizing the oneness of all over superficial distinctions, petty grievances, and abstract divisions. The assassin resolves to sacrifice himself and his personal desire for vengeance to serve the greater whole, surrendering his mission to lay down his individual destiny for the collective. His selfless act touches the heart of the emperor, empowering him to pursue his vision of welfare for all.

At the climax of the story, Nameless becomes a different kind of martial hero. The final image of the film shows only Nameless's silhouette outlined against the walls of the emperor's palace by the volley of arrows that took his life. His commitment to life is expressed by his absence—his willingness to be subsumed into a newly born, unified China. This is how the big self serves life.

Still, I don't want to make it sound like the transition from show business to philanthropy was easy for me. When I reflect on it now, I think I suffered even more during the first years of the One Foundation than I did as a martial artist or a film actor. For one thing, it was the busiest time in my life. Inspired by my mission and determined to live as the Son of Compassion, I worked myself to the bone. Old habits die hard. In those early years of philanthropy, I still clung to a worldly target. I transferred my way of thinking from the film business to my meditation practice and to disaster relief work without ever truly examining it. Perhaps I was acting out of compassion, but my compassion was not yet tempered by wisdom. As a result, I worked harder as a fundraiser than I ever had as an actor.

In 2007, I made three movies and devoted almost all my spare time to charity. In February of that year, I spent two weeks ruminating about charity projects until my hair turned gray. One time I drove from Hengdian to Shanghai to attend a publicity event. On the way back, I crumpled from sheer exhaustion and cried in the back of the car.

Is this all worth it? I asked myself.

I lived the good life as a movie star. I was pampered, and praised, and treated like a precious object. Now, my voice was raw, my back ached, and my stomach was twisted. People who used to cheer me on now jeered. I cried all the way to

Shanghai. The grievances, bitterness, and pain streamed down my face.

Frankly, I suffered more during the first seven years of One Foundation than I had in my film career, because I always had a huge target in my mind. The stage was larger, and the stakes were greater than on any movie—real human lives were at risk. I was constantly comparing my progress with my ideal. If I raised a million dollars, I wanted to raise \$10 million; if I raised \$10 million, I wanted to raise \$100 million. How about a billion! With each little victory, my small self would say, *Oh, we got a sponsor for One Foundation? Let's find a better one! Let's send even more volunteers and collect even more donations! Let's win another award for our altruism!* It also exaggerated my importance in the process: *How will One Foundation survive without me? How can I ever let go of my leadership role?*

Slowly, though, I started to see the effects my efforts were having in the world. The generosity and altruism of thousands of people touched my heart deeply. One day during this time, I took my two younger daughters to Disney. It was pouring down rain, so we rushed from the car to the hotel lobby. A manager awaited us, holding an envelope.

"What is this?" I asked.

"This is \$84," she said, handing me the envelope.

I looked in the envelope. It contained 84 one-dollar bills. I was confused.

"The hotel has eighty-four employees total," she said, "and everyone donated one dollar. We love One Foundation. Everyone wanted to help."

I stood there, drenched from the rain, sobbing in the lobby of that hotel. It wasn't the \$84 itself, but the thought that eighty-four people believed in our mission enough that they

were willing to offer their own money to help. All ideas need people to support them. One Foundation is nothing without the willing support of kind and compassionate people. These tears were different from the ones I cried at the end of my retreat with Master Shengyen when I saw the volunteers washing dishes in the snow. Those people were united by a shared religious ideal, a common belief in the teachings of the Buddha. But the employees at the Disney hotel were united by something greater that transcended a single religion, nation, ethnicity, or any other identifier. They were giving their money from a sense of common humanity as citizens of the earth. This envelope with \$84 meant that eighty-four people believed that every person can help a little bit to change the world we share.

On May 12, 2008, an earthquake rocked Wenchuan Province in Sichuan. This catastrophe shook half of Asia, the worst in over thirty years. Sixty-nine thousand people lost their lives. I was in Singapore when I got the call, and I flew to Beijing overnight to hold a press conference with the Red Cross Society of China to begin emergency relief efforts. The next day, I went with a small team including Vincent to the disaster area to get a sense of local conditions on the ground. The devastation I witnessed was shocking. Huge concrete structures had been reduced to piles of rubble, with rescue workers and volunteers picking through the debris. From Wenchuan, we flew to Shanghai to appeal to the public to donate through various channels. Later, I returned with many supplies. After several years of hard work gathering support and building networks, One Foundation was able to successfully rally a corps of temporary volunteers to help deliver supplies and carry out its first large-scale disaster relief effort. In addition to the in-person volunteers, hundreds of thousands of people donated money online, 1 yuan per person. Little by little, we accumulated an

unprecedented 70 million yuan! This was truly compassion in action.

Later, when Vincent's first-line video of the disaster scene was shared online, the public was shocked to see the first batch of One Foundation volunteers assisting the government in the relief effort. This was their introduction to the power of what we had created. Additionally, every donation of materials distributed by the One Foundation is recorded transparently through a third-party accounting company, which builds trust with donors. All our hard work at the outset had paid off. For the first time in Chinese history, we had developed a process for recruiting and deploying private volunteers to help with natural disaster relief. On top of that, we had a new way for ordinary people to invest in the effort through their own small donations.

To date, there have been more than 9 billion separate instances of donation to One Foundation, with countless people donating many different times. That's almost 1 yuan raised for every human being on the planet. It is my hope that, even after I die, One Foundation will continue to help people.

After witnessing One Foundation's response to the 2008 earthquake, I felt the focus of my life had shifted. Only after One Foundation was successful, and everyone said, "What a great idea!" could I finally breathe easily and feel I might live up to the name the Karmapa gave me. I no longer saw myself as primarily a movie star striving to accumulate wealth and fame for my own personal benefit. Now I saw myself as a spiritual practitioner making charitable work the object of his practice.

The connection between becoming a grandson and embodying the freedom beyond freedom of *zizai* is illustrated in the opening of the common Chinese version of the *Heart*

Sutra. In this sutra, *Avalokiteśvara* challenges our mistaken perception of reality as concrete, permanent, and inherently real. Normally, this figure is called Guanyin in Chinese, meaning, “[The One Who] Perceives the Sounds of the World,” an embodiment of vast compassion. In the *Heart Sutra*, however, they’re called Guan Zizai: “the one who perceives and illuminates *zizai*.” This name connects the unshakable ease found in basic contentment with an innate expression of care to alleviate the suffering of others. In other words, when we’re not driven by our strong desires, finding boundless freedom in mere presence, the natural consequence is an outpouring of love.

When we become a grandchild to the world, we recognize life doesn’t revolve around us and the concerns of our small self—our desires, our drama, our self-image. With genuine humility, we see ourselves as part of a larger whole and begin to devote our energy, passion, and care for the benefit to that whole. As a grandchild, we’re neither inflated nor deflated: We act naturally, untethered from pride and self-obsession, infused with a newfound confidence rooted in loving service. Like Nameless in *Hero*, we embody a radical kind of heroism, willingly dissolving our personal wants to open up and become part, however small, of the great undertaking of collective well-being.

Sitting in meditation on that sleepless night after the tsunami, I scrutinized the protective shell of a self-serving Jet Li. The courage and determination to go beyond my own selfish concerns surged within me. For the next seven years, through my work on One Foundation, I did everything in my power to help others and express my belief in compassion. I thought that by engaging in philanthropy, I could take some power away from the small self. If the small Jet Li wouldn’t get out of the center, I’d drag him out myself. And in some ways, it

worked. I became a grandson to the world, the world's most famous beggar. At this level, my practice did lead me from my small self to my big self, the one who acts for the benefit of all beings.

Again, though, I'd just substituted one set of hooks for another. A big self is still a self, and the small self may use subtler and more cunning ways to feel like the master. It may even let the identity of the big self go to its head, thinking, *What a great person I am!* After all, a big self is bigger than a small one. As long as I approached the work this way, it was just another version of the same hamster wheel.

It would take further struggles—with my profession, my health, and my family—to guide me to temper my aspiration for compassion with wisdom.

CHAPTER 8

THE GIFT OF SURRENDER





I was in the ocean, reaching out to my bewildered child as we both sank helplessly into the water. This wasn't a flashback of my near-death experience in the 2004 tsunami. It was a film set.

The movie was *Ocean Heaven*. I played Wang, the single father of a twenty-one-year-old autistic man named Dafu. As the film opens, we see Wang taking Dafu out in a boat onto the ocean. He ties weights to each of their legs and throws himself overboard, taking Dafu with him. Later, we learn that Wang has received a terminal cancer diagnosis, causing him terrible distress over Dafu's future. In his despair, he decides it would be best for them both to drown. At the last moment, Dafu slips the rope and saves them.

This scene was agony for me to shoot, requiring me to hold my breath underwater for extended periods surrounded by support divers. The director, Xue Xiaolu, insisted on minimal cuts to preserve the emotional continuity, so the whole sequence had to be as real and as sustained as possible. She told us there would be no music, just the sound of muffled, desperate breaths full of water. I did over twenty takes in that freezing water to capture the perfect balance of despair and tenderness on Wang's face. While we were filming, I'd look at the face of Wen Zhang, the actor playing Dafu, and see my own daughter in the whipping waves of the tsunami, reliving the helplessness I felt in the grips of the ocean's power. In between takes, I sat alone, shaking and silent. In action movies, the pain shown on

screen is mostly fake (unless, of course, you're breaking a bone). But the pain of almost drowning a child stayed in my bones. In that scene, I stopped acting—my tears were real.

Returning to my powerlessness in the water was only one of a series of tests I set for myself while making *Ocean Heaven*. This film also marked my first foray into a truly dramatic role with no wushu and no action. I played a completely ordinary person whose problems could not be solved by fighting. Forcing me to rely on emotional expression rather than physical performance, the role demanded everything from my heart, not just my body. A well-known actor can easily slip into an automatic style of performance, believing great acting is an expression of fame. But it isn't; it's an expression of heart. Sometimes I called my own children from the set to remind myself why the story mattered.

Then there was the dedication of my costar Wen Zhang. His preparation was meticulous. He spent months observing people with autism—their gestures, their voices, how they hold chopsticks, how they avoid eye contact. When we acted together, he wasn't performing; he *became* Dafu. His dedication taught me to listen and react truthfully, not just act. As an action star, I was used to reacting quickly and spontaneously, right in the moment. But Wen taught me the power of small details—a glance, a pause. In drama, those moments matter more than any punch. I was used to sparring with a hundred stunt men at a time, but Wen's acting scared me more than any fight scene, because I had to be entirely real.

I was also testing myself off-screen. By 2009, I considered my work for One Foundation as my full-time job and my work in films as a hobby. If I was going to make another movie, the entire process had to align with my overarching intention to alleviate suffering. However, I didn't want to feel I was always

waiting for another disaster to strike before I could help people. I asked myself, *Who needs help right now?*

At One Foundation, we poured our time and energy into research, considering populations whose suffering was not terminal, but who would benefit from compassionate care and attention. We identified families caring for a child with autism as one of these populations. Autistic children may be highly sensitive to sounds, smells, or textures; they may be nonverbal or require visual aids for communication; or they may be prone to emotional overwhelm leading to repetitive self-soothing behaviors. If the child's symptoms are severe, one parent may have to provide full-time care while the other works, which is often a recipe for burnout. On top of that, societies have been slow to acknowledge the specific struggles and gifts of people with neurodivergence, leading to stigma and misunderstanding. For example, Dafu, the young man in *Ocean Heaven*, has a deep affinity for the ocean, swims with the effortless grace of a dolphin, and innately understands the harmony of underwater life; however, he struggles with the tasks of everyday life, from answering the phone to riding the bus to cooking for himself.

In the midst of our research, Bill Kong, the producer of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*; *Hero*; and *Fearless*, shared the script for *Ocean Heaven* with me. It was by a woman named Xue Xiaolu, who had volunteered for years with Beijing Stars and Rain, a nongovernmental education organization for children with autism, and the story was based on a real relationship she had witnessed. Every actor who had read it had turned it down.

I cried when I read the script, as I did when I first read *Hero*. I saw a unique opportunity to fuse my filmmaking work with my intention for compassionate action. I let Bill Kong know I wanted to take the part. We put together the best possi-

ble team for the project, and Ms. Xiaolu signed on to direct the film herself. Then came the question of my salary.

After years of practice, I'd developed the habit of checking in with myself to see if my words and behavior matched my deepest beliefs. It's easy to say I want to live by my values, but hard to implement. As a movie star in those days, I could command about \$10 million US to play a lead role.

Would it be better, I wondered, just to make another commercial film and get paid millions of dollars I could pour into my charity efforts?

I contemplated on this question incessantly, inquiring into my motivations and consulting with my teachers and my advisors at One Foundation. Finally I decided to view *Ocean Heaven* as a chance to practice altruism on the job. My salary would be 1 yuan. It was another test: I wanted to see if I could let go of the hook of financial ambition. I smiled to myself thinking how I had come full circle back to the filming of *Shaolin Temple*, when I earned 1 yuan per day. Back then, I'd had no choice and had struggled furiously to raise my salary. Now, through One Foundation, 1 yuan has taken on a much richer meaning: It symbolized my belief that there was more to life than material wealth, just as the millions of donations of 1 yuan each for disaster relief symbolized our individual participation in a shared humanity. Filming on *Ocean Heaven* would start in Qingdao in mid-2009.

However, in the days leading up to the shoot, I suddenly lost about fifteen pounds. My cheekbones pushed a bit more sharply at the skin in my face, and my ribs protruded in my chest. One day before filming started, I was in Singapore giving a speech at a university to promote One Foundation. Because I believed so deeply in the mission, I was never nervous in situations like this, even though they involved public speaking. I'd

learned to share my sincerity directly with my audience, bridging their hearts with my hopes and goals. But this time, as I stood on the stage in front of the audience, I kept shaking uncontrollably. It was as if I'd just been pulled out of an ocean of freezing water, but I wasn't cold. I'd never experienced anything like this. Still, I soldiered on as I'd learned to do through all my previous injuries.

When I passed through Hong Kong, my good friend Tiffany saw my physical state and became distressed.

"Something is wrong," she said. "You've lost too much weight, and you need to go in for a checkup."

I went to a doctor in Hong Kong who performed a course of routine tests and said their office would follow up once they had the results. From there I went to the airport to fly to Qingdao to start filming *Ocean Heaven*. As I was lining up to board the plane, I got the call.

A nurse from the doctor's office said, "Mr. Li, I don't know how to tell you this, but some of the values from the tests are not good."

My heart clenched at this news. "Okay," I said, "what's the worst possibility here?"

The nurse continued: "It may be cancer. But we need to wait for the full report to be completed before the doctor will know for sure."

The sudden news shocked me. This was a test I hadn't signed up for. Standing at my gate in the airport, I started sweating, my pulse accelerated, and my hands shook. All the bustling noise from the terminal diminished to a low hum. My entire awareness was pulled into the tunnel of this one thought. Then I blinked and came to my senses. I heard the boarding announcement for my flight, and I got on the plane. I didn't tell anyone about the news.

The flight lasted an hour. For the first ten or fifteen minutes, my thoughts ricocheted as my roiling mind tried to confront the possibility of imminent death: *How can this be happening to me? What will happen to my family? There must be something I can do!*

Then, remembering my training, I started to look at the situation more rationally. I believed that it was only my body dying, not the part of me that persists beyond all external conditions. Several years before, I had faced death three times in quick succession. At the end of 2004, I was bludgeoned by waves and almost swept away by the tsunami. The following year, while filming *Fearless*, I slipped and fell off an eight-foot wooden platform, landing heavily on the hard-packed earth and damaging my internal organs. A few months after that, I went on retreat at a remote Tibetan monastery thousands of feet above sea level, where I developed severe altitude sickness and was unable to breathe due to the earlier shock to my organs. Three times in a period of 365 days, my life had hung by a thread.

Each time I survived, my desire to become truly free became stronger. I'd also learned to view the events in my life from a much vaster perspective, one that did not put my small life at the center of the multitude of beings. In the grand scheme of the universe, what difference did my death make? Maybe some people who loved me would mourn my absence, but the rest of the world would roll on perfectly smoothly without me. I'd leave behind plenty of money for my family. Whether Jet Li is alive or dead, everyone else would wake up the next day and suffer and seek happiness just the same.

When my mind had calmed down enough to think clearly, I reasoned out how I would use the time remaining to me. *Even if it is cancer*, I thought, *I probably still have a month or two*

left to live, right? That's enough to finish the movie I'm working on. Anyway, my role is a father with terminal cancer, so I'll already be in character. I won't even need to lose weight. I'll just finish the movie, then go see the doctor.

Three days later, the doctor called and said, “Mr. Li, your full blood work came back. There’s good news and bad news. The good news is that your disease is not cancer, so you can set your mind to rest about that. The bad news is that you have hyperthyroidism, and you will have long-term health problems.”

The thyroid is an organ in charge of the body’s metabolism. When it produces excessive hormones, the body’s natural rhythms of consumption and digestion get out of alignment. Compared with the chilling shock of that first phone call when the nurse told me I might have cancer, I felt at peace with my thyroid condition.

Now that I had my diagnosis and I knew my condition was not terminal, I decided to complete filming on *Ocean Heaven* before starting treatment for hyperthyroidism. I filmed the whole movie while sick—including that scene in the freezing water where I almost drowned my child. When Wang struggles with exhaustion on screen, curling up on a sofa to rest, that is really Jet Li struggling. My wish to collapse the distinction between my film life and my real life had ironically been fulfilled beyond all imagining. On top of that, the responsibilities of managing One Foundation weighed on me. Whenever I had downtime on set, I was answering emails, sitting in on conference calls, and strategizing novel fundraising approaches. In my fervor to reach all my goals and live from my big self, I was essentially working two full-time jobs while suffering from an untreated chronic illness. I was being tested on a grand scale I hadn’t bargained for.

During that time, hyperthyroidism often caused my heart-beat to reach over 100 beats per minute, even when my body was still, like I had a hummingbird in my chest. I had a ravenous appetite but couldn't keep the weight on my body. By the time filming was completed, I truly looked like a terminal patient.

As soon as I returned home, I began treatment. Hyperthyroidism is not always a serious problem and can usually be controlled within six months by taking the proper medication.

When I met with my doctor, he told me, "The medication I'm going to give you works for 97 percent of people. Only 3 percent don't show positive results."

I took the medicine he recommended, but my condition didn't improve. I kept losing weight, and my heart kept beating erratically. After doing some tests, the doctor concluded I was one of that 3 percent for whom the medicine was ineffective. He put me on another medication, saying, "This one works for 98 percent of people. Only 2 percent don't see good results."

This medication didn't work, either. A plague of physical symptoms kept me very uncomfortable: In addition to the heart palpitations and weight loss I was experiencing, my body temperature shot up even in normal temperatures until I was dripping with sweat, and my fingers trembled. I visited many practitioners and experts, in both Chinese and Western traditions, but as with my stomach ailment earlier in my life, I couldn't find any solution no matter what I tried.

I went back to my primary doctor, and he explained my options. Beyond the usual medications, there were two treatments: the American style and the British style. The American style is a suite of aggressive chemical measures, including taking radioactive iodine (iodine-131). This treatment destroys

thyroid cells, but it can cause the opposite problem of hypothyroidism, which requires spending the rest of your life on a whole other suite of medications. The British style is to perform surgery to remove the thyroid gland itself.

“The British style is effective for almost everyone,” he said. “Just a simple procedure. But in a small number of cases, say 2 percent, if the surgeon removes too little of the gland, it can damage the nerves in the throat, resulting in hoarseness or even permanent loss of the voice.”

Given my history of luck, the 2 percent chance felt inevitable. Upon careful consideration, I decided to take iodine-131.

After I had taken five units, the amount of reactivity in my body was enough to set off an alarm when I went through customs at the airport. I jokingly called the drug a “mini atomic bomb.” But after taking the medication for about half a year, my condition had still not improved. I was yet again one of those patients who did not respond to the treatment. The doctor increased my dosage to eight units, and I took it for another six months. I was like a walking nuclear warhead. Then something strange happened. The test results came back, and the results were still the same.

The doctor was surprised: “Only 1 to 3 percent of people treated with the iodine don’t respond at this level of dosage.”

When I heard the news, I couldn’t help but laugh at myself and my situation: “So unlucky! I always lose by the smallest chance!”

Another unwelcome test came when *Ocean Heaven* was released. Speaking bluntly, almost no one saw it. Because it was not a commercial film, few theaters were willing to play it, and it had limited screenings outside China, mostly at film festivals and special showings for charity. At first, it grossed approxi-

mately 14 million yuan (around \$2.1 million US in 2010). To put this into perspective, my action films often earned ten or a hundred times more. I thought to myself, *Everyone is always rushing to release my action films, but when I make something for the public welfare to express my deepest beliefs, no one cares!* Part of me even wished I had the \$10 million salary I could have earned on a blockbuster so I could just donate it to the cause. Audiences' neglect of the film also stung me as an actor. To this day, I still consider my role as Wang to be my most nuanced performance. I put my whole heart into it, stripping myself down from the epic, superhuman grandeur of an action star to the raw feeling of an ordinary man.

Later, the director Xue Xiaolu gave me another perspective. She told me that since *Ocean Heaven* was released, she had received messages and calls from thousands of parents of autistic children who wanted to convey their gratitude for the film and for our efforts at raising awareness around their situation. And after sixteen years, the world has changed. Today, celebrities, content creators, athletes, and musicians volunteer their time for the cause of autism awareness and cite *Ocean Heaven* as their inspiration. There are many things worth doing in life that people won't understand at first. You have to persist and try your best, trusting someone will one day see the value.

After two years of active treatment for hyperthyroidism, I had made no progress at all. The disease seemed to be entangled with my life to the end. I knew from my training that I had two options: I could resist my lot, hate the illness, and feel cursed—in other words, pour bitterness on my pain—which would only increase my suffering. Alternatively, I could see the experience of illness as a real-life test of my practice. Every day presented a new challenge: my weight, my pulse, and my mood were constantly fluctuating. I couldn't focus my scattered

mind. As soon as I fell asleep, I'd wake up again with a start. And most noticeably, my eyes began to bulge. As a film actor, I knew that a facial deformity meant the end of a career. How could I make a movie with my eyes protruding from their sockets?

Protruding eyes were a shocking physiological change, but it was the changes in my mental state that gave me my real practice. There were mornings when I'd wake up and look in the mirror and see my face wasn't normal. Sometimes I didn't recognize the sick old man I saw reflected before me. I grieved the loss of my good health, my once-renowned physical strength, and my pleasing appearance. This wasn't a natural process of aging, but something premature and unnatural that I couldn't control.

Although I'd had many experiences with physical suffering, from broken bones to gastrointestinal ailments, hyperthyroidism was different because its effects were so visible. When I broke a bone, no one knew I was injured. I could take a painkiller, put on stylish clothes, and still go out in public and appear strong in front of journalists and moviegoers. That's what I'd done when the producers of *Shaolin Temple* told me to promote the movie without telling anyone my leg was broken.

But this was my face. When my fans saw me in the street, I could tell something was off. They were usually too polite to comment, but I could see from their wide eyes and grimacing mouths that my illness made them uncomfortable. I had to muster up my courage before I faced the world. I wore hats and sunglasses out in public so people wouldn't stop and stare.

Most of the time, however, I stayed in balance. I understood I had to accept my life, the good and the bad. *I have to stay home more of the time? Fine!* I didn't like going out anyway. I

wasn't overly troubled by my impending career crisis. As the saying goes, the waves of the Yangtze River push the current restlessly along, meaning everyone grows old and will die. Life is movement. I'd finished shooting *Ocean Heaven*, and I'd already said back in 2006 that *Fearless* was my final martial arts film.

If film is my hobby, is it really such a tragedy if I have to stop? I thought.

Maybe it was time to actively change my career. I was already pouring my energy into fundraising for charity. It was only a matter of time before I could no longer act. I wanted to lower myself down slowly from the peak of fame anyway, to take time to examine myself and my life and slowly move from the center of focus.

In the process of fighting hyperthyroidism, my body failed repeatedly. Still, I maintained my commitment to One Foundation, working hard to fulfill my altruistic vow. Although my motivation was to pursue public welfare, my old ambitious thinking sometimes crept back in, and I set unrealistic expectations for myself: this many individual donations, that much money raised; this corporate sponsor, that global brand endorsement. Striving to meet those lofty goals, I put undue pressure on myself. The internal pressure caused me stress, and the stress agitated my thyroid condition.

When I dragged myself into my doctor's office, he said to me, "Endocrine disorders are caused by stress and tension. You're making it harder on yourself."

Reflexively, I defended myself, saying, "I study Buddhism and understand the principles of impermanence. Life and death are okay with me. I see things in the world with an open mind, so I won't be affected by this illness."

The doctor gave me a skeptical look. “That’s what you think, but your body doesn’t lie. Your test results prove that you’re under a lot of stress.”

I had to learn again the lesson from my teacher Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro: Theory and practice are not the same. Even though I boasted about my wisdom to the doctor, I still suffered from the habits of my mind. Maybe I had broken away from the self-centered ego of my small self; maybe by acting out of my big self, I had redirected my motivation from fame and financial success to public welfare. But if I persisted in my attachment to results, public welfare was just another boss outside myself. Being my own boss is a slippery practice! Even if I’m acting from the perspective of the big self, I can still cling to a target, and the clinging will still hook and torment me. As long as I’m mired in the same old clinging, no matter the target, I’ve lost hold of my center of gravity and gotten caught in the endless cycle of life and death.

In the end, it took five years for me to get my thyroid condition stabilized. I continued to try all kinds of medical treatments, but every time the doctors tested me, they declared them ineffective. Finally, the doctor increased my dosage of iodine-131 to ten units. It took another half a year for the condition to be truly under control. In the process, though, the radiation had destroyed too many of my thyroid cells, and my condition shifted from hyperthyroidism to hypothyroidism, as they had warned it might. I now require lifelong medication to maintain the balance. Looking back, I can see how my condition was itself a kind of warning system. When I veered too far into self-centered motivation and produced stress in my body, my disorder rang out to alert me and bring me back to wisdom. Just as health depends on happiness for lasting well-being, so does happiness depend on health.

Those years when I was frenetically working on philanthropy while battling hyperthyroidism gave me a gift I didn't expect. I used to think freedom meant being in control. I tried to control in many situations: when I competed in martial arts; when I attempted to prescribe which movies I acted in and how much I got paid; when I sought to dictate which masters I learned with and what lessons they taught me. When I resolved to seek true freedom, I wanted to control the timeline, deciding I would do it in a single human lifetime. Vowing to set aside my small self for my big self, I decided to do it as an act of will. Sure, there would be challenges along the way, but they were challenges I chose, on my terms.

However, when the nurse told me I might have cancer, or when *Ocean Heaven* bombed while my body was racked with physical pain, or when my thyroid results kept coming back with no improvement and my eyes bulged—these were not conscious decisions I made. These were the tests of life just coming at me fast, without warning. It wasn't me consciously pulling out my hooks and giving up the identities I'd relied on; instead they were being taken from me. Yes, I wanted to go in that direction, but when change actually comes at you in life, it always comes too fast. You can only surrender or get knocked over. The true tests in life are the ones you don't choose. These tests teach you the nature of the true freedom of *zizai*: Like a mirror, it reflects all things without preference, without applying labels of good or bad, beautiful or ugly, proper or improper. When you are liberated from the need to control anything, simply watching everything unfold, there's only a vast, open acceptance where all is okay as it arises.

• • •

IN 2010, ONE FOUNDATION WAS finally approved to become a legal entity independent from the humanitarian projects run under the auspices of the Red Cross Society of China. At the beginning of 2011, we officially announced the establishment of One Foundation and began autonomous operations. After that, the name Jet Li was no longer part of One Foundation's name. From the start, I'd said, "The One Foundation without Jet Li is the real One Foundation." I felt like my character Nameless from *Hero*, leaving only the shape of his absence outlined by arrows in service of the greater good. I had finally achieved my vision and began living up to the name the Karmapa gave me: Son of Compassion.

Completing the staged goals of One Foundation was like completing a training in big self. I had experienced what it was like to move Jet Li out of the center of life and act for the benefit of others. In fact, I'd run myself down into a state of physical and mental fatigue in the pursuit of "selfless" cultivation. For all the compassion I'd expressed to beings across the world, I struggled to offer it to myself. I had to admit that the fundamental issue of life and death was still unsolved for me. I'd had a taste of the big self beyond my own ego, but I wasn't yet entirely rooted in an experience of what was beyond self. The big self, however helpful and beneficial to others, is still caught in the exhaustion of the endless cycle of life and death, as I'd felt when I wept in the back seat of that car from sheer fatigue.

I soon had another opportunity to see how much I was still holding on to a sense of self, however subtly. In July of 2011, I attended an invitation-only course on Tibetan Buddhist tantra offered by one of my primary teachers, Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, in Vancouver. This was a very exciting opportunity: it was said that Khyentse Rinpoche's master, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, had ordered Khyentse Rinpoche to give this teach-

ing only after he was fifty years old, and this was the year of his fiftieth birthday. To attend, I rejected a Chinese film project, then turned down another offer to act in an American film.

Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche's birthday fell during the course period, so we threw a party for him. A lover of celebrations and mischief of all kinds, he proposed we have a costume party and insisted all the participants wear disguises. I watched as Rinpoche's Western disciples produced all kinds of weird and colorful costumes: celebrities and superheroes, monsters and harlequins. In that moment, I thought to myself, *How embarrassing would it be for me, Jet Li, a public figure and international movie star, if photos of me in strange clothes were somehow leaked to the press?* I couldn't let go of my obsession: The hard shell of Jet Li that I had built up so solidly with such force of will couldn't be broken so easily. So I quietly declined the invitation to the party and spent the evening practicing alone.

Watching these Western disciples put aside their worldly identities and enjoy the masquerade, I realized that I still had a long way to go in practicing Buddhism. The costume party was itself a teaching from my master. He was using his skill and wisdom to guide his students to uncover and examine their inner attachments. Such irony! The covering of the masks actually revealed the selves we were trying to protect. But at the time, I could only remain hidden in plain sight.

Rushing around to create One Foundation for those six years, I hadn't had time to practice step by step according to the traditional Tibetan teachings. Even so, I still managed to find time to meet with my master, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro, to ask for help and guidance. After One Foundation began operating independently in 2011, it was as if I'd successfully raised a child. It no longer needed me to lead the team or answer ques-

tions or fundraise on its behalf. It could go out in the world on its own. For the first time in years, I got to have a long conversation with my teacher. I reeled off all my altruistic efforts, just as I'd tried to impress him when we first met with all my Buddhist achievements.

He listened kindly, with the same soft smile he gave me when he directed me to go back to kindergarten, then said, "Your undertakings for public welfare won't help you reach true freedom. It's good to accumulate good deeds, but they're all still only blessings for human beings in this life. If you want to be truly free, you still need to enter into practice."

I wrestled with my teacher's words. I had been operating under the assumption that the more people I helped, the closer I came to my own freedom. My teacher's words were like an alarm bell awakening me from a deep trance. I saw the limits of my worldly activities and the hooks they had in me. When a disaster happened, there was only so much water, clothing, and funding I could provide, and after that short-term alleviation of suffering, what then? There were so many areas of human experience I couldn't fix: I couldn't take away the grief of a mother who lost her child or the sorrow of a father whose injuries made it impossible for him to work. I also saw that my own capacity to help was limited by my perspective of myself, the shell of the small Jet Li. No matter how much merit I gained from charitable work, it would never bring me or others beyond life and death.

Khenpo was guiding me to surrender my worldly ambitions and ask myself what is beyond big self. In Buddhism, the answer is called no-self (*anātman* in Sanskrit). Because no-self is a term that attempts to capture that which is beyond language, the phrase is often misunderstood. It doesn't mean that you don't exist at all, and neither does it mean you should attempt

to destroy whatever you identify as self. That is nihilism. Rather, it means there is no permanent, independent, or unchanging essence to what we call self, which is more like a collection of ever-changing processes each dependent on each other and interconnected with all of the rest of life. When we perceive that *everything* has the same ownerless quality of no-self, this is called emptiness (*sūnyatā* in Sanskrit).

The Buddha depicted the self as a chariot. A chariot is just its component parts—wheels, axle, reins. If you try to find a separate essence of “chariot” outside the parts, you won’t find it. Similarly, the self is like a chariot composed of physical elements, perceptions, mental habits, emotions, and consciousness, all of which arise and pass away due to causes and conditions. There is no separate or inherent owner or essence. You might try looking for it. Ask yourself, “Is my body ‘me’? What about my thoughts? My sensations?” What do you observe?

Naturally, this view of self disrupts many of our most cherished beliefs about who we are. But it is also liberating. So much of our suffering is the result of clinging to the illusion of a fixed me (“*I must be respected*” or “*This is my body*”), which causes us to get hooked to all kinds of worldly concerns and keeps our vision of ourselves small and contracted. But if there’s no fixed self, the hooks have nothing to hook onto. And if there’s no separate self, the distinction between me and not-me blurs, breaking open the possibility of deeper compassion and interconnectedness.

In a sense, I had come full circle back to the young boy contemplating the Taoist mystery of wuji, the primordial, undifferentiated state beyond the ceaseless interplay of yin and yang. When I finally got ready to explore Buddhist emptiness, it reminded me of Taoist wuji. They’re not identical, but the similarity was enough to remind me of my deepest and longest-

held yearning: to truly become my own boss. Charity work had been an essential step in the transition from small self to big self, but now I could begin contemplating no-self through my own direct experience. After my teacher gently guided me to see the limitations of philanthropy, I decided that dedicating myself to my own training, to expand my capacity to benefit others, would be the most helpful action I could take. This, too, was a gift of surrender.

For the next five years, I pursued a rhythm of dedicated retreat practice, visiting various masters all over Asia for extended periods of training. As I struggled to get my hyperthyroidism under control, I reduced my workload and turned my primary focus to my teacher's rigorous practice arrangements. In 2014, my health finally stabilized. I tried to go on an extended summer retreat at Khenpo's remote retreat center, but I was stricken with altitude sickness due to my old injuries and had to go back down the mountain. As we transferred our belongings to a lower dormitory, I reflected on the effects of one fall from an eight-foot wooden platform on set. That single accident had weakened my tolerance for high altitude and blocked me so many times from taking refuge in the mountains.

What an irony! I lamented. *My film career, which led me to Tibetan Buddhism, damaged my body so I can't withstand the high altitudes of the mountains in Tibet for long.* I wished I could practice like the young lamas: *They've been training diligently for twenty years in perfect conditions. How can I possibly surpass them?*

In 2016, I visited Tai Situ Rinpoche in New Delhi. Ten years had passed since our previous meeting, so I was bursting with enthusiasm to share with him all the experiences I'd had in the intervening time. Over breakfast, I spouted off details about all the retreats I'd completed and all the realizations I'd reached.

With inflated pride, I paced the room as I spoke about One Foundation: what a successful undertaking it was for public welfare, all the donations we'd raised, and how much effort I'd devoted to it. When I'd mentioned the One Foundation to my other teachers, they'd all seemed very pleased with it, and often praised and complimented me. I similarly wanted to tell Tai Situ Rinpoche what a good job I was doing and hear him say, "You're such a good student!"

As I spoke, Tai Situ Rinpoche listened with the same tolerant smile I'd seen many times on Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro's face. I should have recognized it, but instead I thought, *He's smiling! He must be so impressed and proud of me.*

Then in the middle of my next eloquent phrase, Tai Situ Rinpoche took a deep breath and let out a startling shout. "WHO IS THIS PERSON SHOWING OFF? WHO'S THAT BOASTING?"

It was as if the barometric pressure in the room suddenly plummeted. I stood there with my mouth hanging open, astonished. I felt as though Rinpoche's yell had physically hit me over the head. My mind was completely blank. I stared at Rinpoche, and he held my gaze. A long minute passed. Then, as if nothing extraordinary had happened, Rinpoche picked up the small white pitcher of milk.

"Come," he said, "have some more coffee. Let's finish our breakfast, and then you can continue with your travels. Everything is good."

Such a shout is called the lion's roar. The Buddha is said to have uttered his first lion's roar immediately after attaining awakening to full enlightenment under the bodhi tree. It's a fearless proclamation of unyielding confidence in the Dharma. It sounds like the compassionate thunder of truth. With his roar, Tai Situ Rinpoche cut through everything I was saying to

get to the main point: “Who are you, really?” In my boyish excitement to win his admiration, I’d gone back to my old thinking without knowing it and put Jet Li back at the center.

My teacher’s roar shattered my illusion. For that minute, I’d stood there blank, all thought gone, all sense of self surrendered. That break in thinking is essential in practice. The minute of disorientation that gives a momentary experience of no-self is the teaching. When my thinking resumed, I felt a profound gratitude for my master’s instruction.

When I got home to Singapore, I felt the difference dramatically. Outside formal retreat practice, there seemed to be no structure to life whatsoever, and the distractions were endless. My wife would be watching a TV show and invite me to join her, but I had to hold back so I could do my homework. Then she would ask if I was hungry, but I wanted to stay focused on my practice. That Christmas, the Four Seasons in the Maldives, where we’d weathered the tsunami, invited our family to come for vacation. I knew that after Christmas, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro was going to fly to Singapore to confirm the progress of my practice. I was determined to give him an impressive report.

I told my wife, “Take our daughters instead of me. I need to stay home for these seven days.”

Perhaps I was being a bit rigid in my approach.

I was so caught up in my desire to achieve the best practice in the most favorable conditions that I lost sight of the freedom I was seeking beyond any preferences. You may have your own fantasies of perfect circumstances and if onlys. While it’s useful to seek out environments that will support our goals, this can become a habit that takes us out of the present. If we’re dreaming about our next retreat, thinking, *Next summer I’ll surpass all those other practitioners*, then our next retreat becomes

our boss. If all the time we're working at our jobs, we think of our vacation, the vacation becomes our boss. Then if all we think about on vacation is our work, work is our boss. In the same way, we can make all kinds of practice conditions our boss: solitude, a strict schedule, a remote location. That's the trap I fell into. But Singapore is not Tibet. Homelife is not retreat. Neither set of conditions is essential for true freedom.

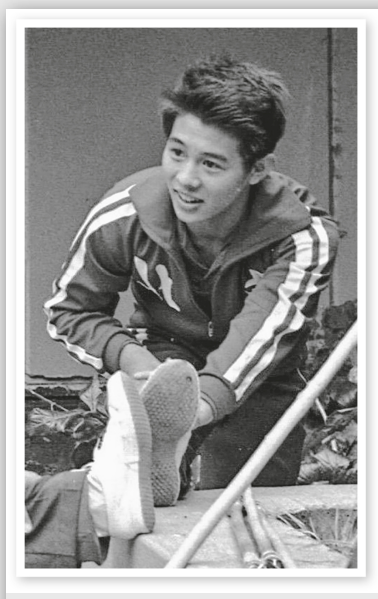
Many people believe they can pursue a spiritual life only if they go up high in the mountains and sit perfectly still in full lotus position. They ask, "If I can't do it like that, why do it at all?" In the meantime, life slips away, and they continue to suffer. Personally, due to my injuries, I can barely sit in full lotus position for even a few minutes. Accepting practice conditions, whatever they are, as they are, is also an act of surrender.

In life, we go through countless tests. Some of them we choose, others we run from. The real tests in life have a way of finding us exactly where we're hiding, forcing us to face them and ourselves. All of us will come up against situations in life that overwhelm us into surrender. If we meet these tests with courage, they give us gifts in return: tenderness, humility, patience. Most important, by confronting us with death—whether of the body or of the sense of self—they wear away the obstacles blocking our access to the part of us that knows itself beyond all distraction.

In my fervor to become truly free, I've sought out rare and wondrous teachings from one great master after another. But for all the advanced initiations I received in my Buddhist journey, it was the suffering of those closest to me that guided me to reckon most deeply with my habits. Only in the heart of family life did I learn how to make everyday existence the true ground of my practice.

CHAPTER 9

MAKE ALL OF LIFE YOUR TRAINING





Because I was two years old when my father passed away, I didn't have a clear idea of a father in my mind. I grew up with just my mother, sisters, brothers, and grandparents. I didn't know what role a man should play in a family because I hadn't experienced that in my life.

This absence affected me deeply. I have a very clear memory of an episode from the set of my first film *Shaolin Temple* when I was seventeen. Early in the story, Jue Yuan watches his father get murdered in front of him by the corrupt emperor. At that moment in the original script, I was supposed to cry out the Chinese word for "dad": "*Baba!*" But when I tried to deliver those lines during filming, no sound came out. It was like I'd gone mute. I had no memory whatsoever of ever saying "*Baba,*" and my mouth couldn't say the word. I kept trying, silently forming the shape, but it was impossible.

I told the director, "I can't say this. Can we use a different word?"

Chinese has another word for "dad": *die*. I felt this word had nothing to do with me, so I could say it. It was like saying, "Hello!"

So the director changed the script, and in the scene, I called out, "*Die!*"

My first two daughters were born in the eighties when I was in my mid-twenties. I had no idea what to do with them. All I knew was to work. I handed off my daughters to their mother

or my mother or one of my siblings and said, “You take care of them.”

By 2000, I had embarked on Buddhist practice for several years. My life had become woven together with the wisdom of my teachers. In the spring of that year, I invited Lho Kunsang Rinpoche to come to the United States to treat me for my stomach ailment and to teach the Dharma. At this time, my second wife was also about to give birth to our first child.

When Rinpoche learned we were about to have a child, he was delighted. He volunteered to join us at the hospital on the due date and made a request.

“After the baby is born,” he said, “she shouldn’t take a bath right away. Instead, hand her to me immediately.”

This was not a simple matter. American hospitals have their own complicated regulations. If you don’t plan to follow the standard operating procedures of the facility for birth, you need to communicate in advance, sign a slew of release forms, and state you will take responsibility for all the consequences if things go wrong with the newborn’s health. Still, my wife and I trusted Rinpoche and were honored by his offer. We agreed to let him take over the process after our child was born.

On the long-awaited day, I stayed with her in the delivery room while Rinpoche and the lamas were waiting in the hallway outside. When my daughter Jane was born, the doctor weighed her and then wrapped her in a cloth without washing her and handed her to me. Straightaway, I took the tiny, wailing baby out of the delivery room into the hallway. As soon as I opened the door, I was greeted by the deafening sound of the lamas crashing cymbals, banging drums, and blowing conch-shell horns. Others lit incense and scattered rice and flowers on the floor. The American doctors and nurses looked appalled at this divergence from the usual protocol: all these monks creat-

ing a cacophonous celebration and making a mess in the Labor and Delivery wing!

I handed my daughter to Rinpoche. He took an antique seal inscribed with Manjushri's mantra, dipped it in a bowl of bright orange saffron water, then gently opened my daughter's mouth and stamped her tongue with the seal. After that, he bathed my daughter in a basin prepared by a lama nearby while reciting mantras. When he was done, he handed her back to me.

"Now they can do the routine tests," he said.

Rinpoche led the lamas to welcome our new baby with traditional solemnity. As I watched the rituals he personally performed, I felt profoundly grateful for his kindness and his care to ensure my daughter came into this world with blessings and love. I also felt a deep sense of the preciousness of life and the rare gift of being born as a human.

By the time I was playing the role of a father in *Ocean Heaven* in 2009, all four of my daughters were born. However, I'd never really thought about how to portray a good father. I started reading books, watching films, and observing the life around me and asking myself, "What makes a good father? How can I make the audience believe Sam really loves Dafu?"

The lesson I learned from acting in this film complemented the lessons I was learning in my spiritual training: Each person is unique, and everyone's nature is to be independent. When my youngest daughter Jada was four years old, she told my wife, "Mommy, my life is mine." My wife and I laughed about this together. Traditionally, Asian parents think of their children as theirs, almost as if they're an extension of them. But here was my daughter asserting her life was her own. This turned out to be a foreshadowing of events to come.

Before we had children, my wife and I had made an agreement: She would look after our kids until they were eighteen, and then I would take over and look after them as adults. My approach to fatherhood was to work hard to give my daughters a better life. That's what I know as love. As a result, I was out of the house for my younger daughters' childhoods, pursuing instead my own goals of film success, philanthropy, and meditation training. While I looked forward to coming home to my daughters' warm welcomes and big smiles, I barely witnessed their early milestones and had little sense of their aspirations and struggles.

The reality of my youngest daughter Jada's difficulties burst into my consciousness on Chinese New Year when she was around thirteen. I always made a point of being home to observe the new year, to celebrate and enjoy the sense of family closeness of the occasion. Chinese New Year was a time when I would see my daughters smile, see them fed well, clothed well, educated well, receiving the fruits of my labor. To give them the material security and safety my family lacked is my pride as a father.

This time, in the midst of the festivities, Jada ran outside, sat down in front of our house, burst into tears, and refused to move for hours. I was staggered. I was accustomed to a certain degree of tranquility at home, and this was a jarring break from the norm. I sat next to my daughter as she cried. Nothing I said made her look at me, let alone speak. As the night grew longer, I watched emotions I'd never seen on my daughter's face before and felt myself a stranger to her.

In the weeks that followed, I kept attempting to understand her and connect with her, and I kept failing. Although she had grown reticent over the years, I always proudly received reports of her good grades and achievements. But it was when I

really turned to look at her that I realized I did not know her and could not reach her. It was like a curtain had dropped between us and I finally saw her where she was: outbursts of anger and sadness followed by days of empty blankness. From my perspective, her world seemed to be made of one door after another, and all the doors were locked. I couldn't go in, and I couldn't ask questions. I could only wait anxiously outside the door. When I looked around at her peers, I saw this phenomenon wasn't limited to my family. Teenagers were attempting suicide in high numbers, but as parents we felt helpless and confused. Culturally, mental health struggles were not discussed in China or Singapore. No one talked openly about these things. After years of meditation, I thought I knew something about mental well-being. In 2009, I was even named a Goodwill Ambassador by the United Nations World Health Organization partly for my work supporting the mental health of young people. But when my own daughter was struggling, I was at a loss.

Although my wife and I resisted at first, we ultimately allowed Jada to seek therapy and begin taking medication. These treatments helped her to regain some stability and capability, but she remained cold and unreachable. Before I made any headway in our relationship, Jada left for boarding school in America. While there, she developed a passion for psychology and showed great curiosity about how to find mental equilibrium. Having taken root in her new environment, she rarely came to visit. Sometimes she came home for winter holidays, but she spent all her summers at internships related to mental health and meditation. For years, we lived like this, at a distance: almost strangers. I loved her, but I was afraid for her—and afraid for myself that I would do or say the wrong thing around her and make the situation worse.

One winter break, she shared some details from her childhood with me. When she was seven years old, she came home from school, threw herself on the floor, and realized she sincerely did not wish to be alive. Something was wrong, and she believed it to be her fault. Unable to share her feelings, she kept this weight to herself, and it grew and grew. Depression and anxiety and all the other technical terms made my head spin, but this paled in comparison to discovering that I had no idea when my daughter had wanted to die.

She assured me she was now better, that she was okay. I was relieved, but hurt that I could hear about her pain only after she had healed. I was all too aware that her emotional state was still volatile, and of the chilly distance that remained between us.

Jada threw me off my own center. When I was a movie star, I was top dog. Everyone had to listen to me, and my feelings were the most important. Now here was a small person who contained a whirlwind of emotions that could change for seemingly no reason. For the first time, I was painfully aware of the hook my care for my daughter had in me, and I was forced to face my limitations as a father. Although I hadn't been physically present for her early years, I was working so hard out in the world to give my daughters everything I hadn't had. Again, though, I'd fallen into the same trap of assuming that external circumstances—wealth, education, leisure—could bring happiness, while disregarding the impact of the mind. *What does this mean for our family?* I asked myself. *What can I do to fix it?*

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted life around the globe. Governments advised their citizens to wear masks, practice social distancing, and avoid public spaces. Travel halted; economies faltered. During times of lockdown, we were re-

stricted from going out at all. It was as if the whole world was on a meditation retreat. Ever since my first awakening to a spiritual path in 1997, I'd been trying to retire from worldly life and retreat from the world. I wanted to spend all my time practicing to become truly free, but my teachers kept guiding me back toward the life of a layperson.

A few years before the outbreak of COVID-19, I'd asked my master Tai Situ Rinpoche again, "Can I finally become a full-time practitioner?"

"Of course not," he said.

I was disconcerted yet amused. Yet another teacher dissuading me from full-time meditation. I protested and asked, "But don't you encourage your disciples to concentrate on their spiritual practice?"

He looked at me with the kind patience of a man accustomed to hearing the same questions over and over again. "You're a movie star, a kung fu champion, a hero to your culture. You have a good career, a healthy family, and you use your influence to promote public welfare. In all aspects of worldly life, you appear to be perfect. Many people look up to you and hope to reach your level of achievement. It's certainly beneficial that you can practice meditation, but if you live the life of a full-time monastic, you'll shatter the value of your example to all those people. They may even become suspicious of Buddhism and accuse it, saying, 'It was Buddhism that ruined Jet Li's success!' If that happens, not only will your practice be useless, but you may hurt Buddhism in the process."

How many times had my teachers taught me the same lesson to be part of the world! And how many times had I taken up the idea to withdraw from it again?

Finally, twenty-three years after my first dedication to practice, the conditions of a global pandemic granted me my wish

to live in seclusion. I took this opportunity to enter intensive at-home retreat practice, intending to keep it up for the traditional period of three years and three months. Years of hard work had given me the discipline to keep to a rigorous practice schedule on my own. My wife and I sat in meditation together, often for eight hours a day. When travel restrictions were eased, masters such as Mingyur Rinpoche, Tsoknyi Rinpoche, and Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche all came to visit us and guide us in our practice.

I was so content with my isolation. But during one of Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche's visits, he spoke to me seriously. "Stop retreating like this. Go back out and be a part of the world. You should combine your life and your practice together, not work so hard to keep them separate."

He was right. I'd succumbed to a common mistake of practitioners: dividing up life and judging some of it appropriate for practice and the rest of it inappropriate. Solitude at home in rigidly controlled conditions—yes; uncontrollable and perplexing emotional chaos in my family life—no. The Tibetan tradition teaches that it's possible to take everything in life—all our desires and all our suffering—as an object of reflection. We can make all of life our training, no matter how seemingly inconsequential, shameful, or baffling. This concept is a way of expanding the circle that constrains which parts of experience we're willing to attend to deeply, allowing for spaciousness and a broad variety of flavors in our practice.

During this period of my life, Jada barely spoke to me. She might call her mother once in a while and occasionally send a text to our family group chat. Then, in April 2022, as if in answer to Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche's advice, I received a crucial phone call.

When I heard Jada's voice on the other end, I was surprised. My first reaction was concern: *Did something bad happen? Is she in trouble?* But the reality was just the opposite. She was about to complete her freshman year at university and was looking ahead to the summer. She shared with me that she had been undergoing a long process of healing, had tried five different prescriptions of Western medication, and experimented with a variety of therapies. She felt that her studies and experiences had revealed to her the limitations of Western psychiatric care, and she was frustrated that all her prescriptions seemed to treat the symptoms rather than the root cause of unhappiness. During one of her therapy sessions, she was reminded of the meditation guidance given to her by Mingyur Rinpoche when she was a child. Over the past two years, she started to explore different meditation spaces.

"It all helped somewhat, but not enough," she said. "American psychiatry seems to be about becoming a functional human being. There's no real promise of being happy. I'm okay, but I want more than that. I notice that some of the happiest people I've met are Buddhists and I'm curious about your world. Do you have any recommendations?"

When my daughters were growing up, I didn't attempt to impose my Buddhist practice or beliefs on them, preferring to keep my spiritual life and home life separate. I trusted they would choose for themselves one day. Jada's phone call delighted me, but also showed me how distant we'd become: She didn't even know I was on a three-year retreat. When I heard Jada's question, I thought of my original intention to remain on retreat until 2023 and immediately changed my mind. My daughter had never asked me for help with anything. Of course I would drop everything to help her! Sometimes life has a way

of knocking us off course in just the way we need when we're most certain we're on the right track.

It happened that Mingyur Rinpoche was teaching in the United States at this time. I registered Jada and me for his Joy of Living course in Minnesota that summer. In May, I flew to San Jose to visit one of my older daughters, and Jada joined me there. I had so much to tell her. I was so excited to share all my experiences with Buddhism, and all the wisdom I'd learned. Still, I approached the role of teacher with trepidation. I had studiously avoided teaching martial arts because I hate to drill the same things over and over again and was afraid I would give up if my students couldn't learn at the same pace as me. But in my excitement, I sat with her and spoke about everything I thought was important, talking at length about emptiness and bodhisattvas and energy channels and hell realms for hours.

When I was done, she gave me a blank look. Maybe I had talked *at* her more than with her. She explained to me she was just a beginner and didn't know all these advanced terms. Still, it was the longest we'd ever spoken to each other since she'd lived at home.

From San Jose, we went to Boston to attend Jane's graduation from Harvard, and from there, we went to Minnesota to join Mingyur Rinpoche. After the program I introduced Jada to my teacher again, and they chatted for a short time. As Jada confided in Rinpoche about her struggles, she began to cry.

Oh no! I thought. Did I make a mistake?

Rinpoche listened carefully, nodding and smiling gently at Jada. He shared how, when he was practicing as a child, he suffered from anxiety, and how meditation had helped him. Then he offered her a simple teaching. I was moved by his compassion and his light touch. Once the program started, Rinpoche

gave Jada an hour of personal guidance each day, in addition to public classes. From the sidelines, I watched, with profound gratification, as my daughter embarked on the path that had helped me so much.

From Minnesota, we continued to the University of Wisconsin, following Mingyur Rinpoche's teaching schedule. The classes at the university were larger than those in Minnesota, with many experts and university professors in various fields among the students. In addition to the daily classes, we also attended conferences on Buddhism and neuroscience. For much of her life, Jada's face had appeared to me as blank, disinterested, and disengaged, but now her face had come alive, full of curiosity and engagement. She eagerly asked questions and seemed to grasp quickly concepts that I had struggled at length to understand. Later, she confided to me that she'd felt like an impostor at first, because everyone else was so experienced and so passionate. Slowly she realized that everyone's fundamental struggle, whether misguided or not, is toward happiness, and she belonged equally. I'd completed *Joy of Living* online and in person over ten times, but this time I experienced it through my daughter's fresh eyes.

Patiently, Mingyur Rinpoche taught my daughter, beginning with the story of the Buddha's awakening. Watching Rinpoche face a new generation of students and take the trouble to start from the basics, again and again, decade after decade, was instructive for me. I wondered if my resistance to teaching could be tempered into a similar expression of compassion. In a sense, this book is my attempt.

After our class in the Midwest, we went to Los Angeles for a month, where Jada had arranged an internship. Later that summer, we would meet up with Mingyur Rinpoche again in Europe. We lived in an apartment in Santa Monica together.

This was where my true training began. We had never shared space in such close quarters. While Jada was a new student in Buddhism, I became a new student of life.

Because of my experience as a famous film actor, there were many ordinary things I didn't know how to do. First off, we needed groceries. At home, my wife or my housekeeper does all the shopping.

"I know!" I said. "Let's go to Costco!"

Back in the late nineties and early 2000s when I lived in Los Angeles, I loved going to Costco. The huge portions, abundance of inventory, and brightly advertised bargains gave me a happy feeling. At Costco, we filled our cart with groceries. But when we brought home our bounty, I was forced to admit I didn't know how to cook anything. Jada made a sarcastic comment, but then patiently taught me the basics, showing me how to boil water, add instant noodles, and check to see when they're done. She was the parent, and I was the useless child.

When our meal was over, Jada made another sarcastic comment about washing the dishes. She was right. I didn't know how to run the dishwasher. After further ridicule, she tried to teach me to use a dishwasher. I let her show me; then I washed all the dishes by hand. When it came time to wash our clothes, she didn't even try to teach me and just washed them herself.

Separated from all the people back home who make my life run, I was dependent on Jada for the most basic needs. When she knew she was working late, she'd order delivery for me and explain how to buzz the driver in to drop off the food. While she was at work, I'd try to clean the apartment, but I didn't know what all the products were for or how to use them. I probably did more chores in that one month than I'd done in years of life at home. This was a very different kind of retreat: a confrontation with ordinary existence, a crash course in taking

life onto my path. After a rocky start, we adjusted to life in the apartment. These were happy days for me. I was grateful to be close to my daughter and to share with her my passion for Buddhism, the most meaningful thing in my life.

Then one day she came home with a disturbed expression on her face. She rushed past me and went into her room, slamming the door behind her. Standing outside her room, I heard her crying. It was a terrible reminder of those years when she was younger. Over the last weeks, I'd felt the heavy door between us open softly. Now it had slammed shut again.

I spoke to the closed door. "Jada? What's wrong? Did something happen at work? Did I do something?"

She didn't answer. For three days, she barely left her room. When she did, she wouldn't tell me what was going on. At one point, I thought she might be hungry. I boiled water like she'd taught me, and made her a plate of frozen dumplings, but she didn't want to eat.

I didn't know what I'd done wrong. I didn't know how to talk to her or to make her happy again. I didn't know if it was serious or not. Was she in a depressive episode? Sitting there in that strange apartment waiting for her to come out, I realized how shaken I'd been all these years by her struggles, when I'd assumed I was calm.

In the evening on the third day, her door opened and she came over to sit with me. "You didn't do anything wrong," she said. "My friend died."

Jada explained to me that she needed to be alone in her grief, but we were okay.

Shortly after that, my daughter Jane came to visit us. Jane has always been more skeptical of the intensity of my meditation practice, and the three of us got into a lively debate. I realized they were more relaxed with me, open to a friendly chat as

they never had been before. But when the topic turned to their childhood, I felt the tension creep into the room. I was excited that we were all able to discuss together as adults, and at one point I told them, “Okay, look, if you have something to say to me, please just tell me. What parts of my behavior don’t you like? Tell me. I can take it.”

Years of unspoken resentment were released. Jane said, “My life has been completely dictated by you, so I never had the freedom to contemplate what I want or who I truly am. When I was little, I loved art and wanted to be in a creative field, but I wasn’t allowed to do any of that. The only goal I was allowed to pursue was to get into an elite university and work in business after I graduated. I became what you wanted me to become, only to find out now that everyone’s a Buddhist who renounced the world! Now I call you and tell you about my problems—I had a breakup, the job market is hard—and you give me some extremely Buddhist answer: ‘These are all empty! These are all impermanent! They’re not real problems. One day you’ll gain wisdom and you won’t have these problems.’ ”

Together they continued, telling me, “You think because of all your meditation and all your teachers that you’ve gotten rid of your arrogant qualities, but you still have so much pride. You always assume you’re right. We know it’s because of your conditioning, but you’re still dismissive and egotistical.”

Now, my English is not so good, while my daughters speak very quickly and fluently. When they called me *egotistical*, I heard *evil*. Suddenly my insides were on fire. I completely lost my inner balance, and I struggled terribly on the inside. I felt ganged up on, wronged and misunderstood. I thought to myself, *I do everything for the family! All the money I make, I give to my wife, and she gives it to you. I’m just out there try-*

ing to help people with all my actions. How can you say I'm evil? I don't understand.

I said nothing, just sat there with my face darkened by emotion. When they saw my expression they said, "You told us to tell you the truth! So we told you the truth, and now you're angry!" Then I stood up and went to my bedroom.

I sat there for a long time, asking myself, "What does it really mean?" I felt like a martial arts master whose disciples had discovered a secret weak spot. After a few hours, I thought, *Wow, I thought I'd practiced enough so that words can't touch me. But I felt attacked by these words from my daughters. I guess I still have a strong ego. I have more to learn.*

When they came back, I asked, "What do you need from me?"

Jada explained, "If we tell you something, we don't always want you to answer. We just want you to be a listener to our ordinary problems. Not everything is so lofty. Don't always give your opinions. Sometimes your shitty opinions break our hearts. Just sit there and listen. That's good enough."

At the end of the month, we were set to fly to Europe to continue our learning with Mingyur Rinpoche. As with cooking and cleaning, I'm helpless when it comes to traveling. I don't know how to buy a plane ticket, book a hotel, or call a cab. So Jada had made our flight arrangements. Because of my history of injury, I need a business class seat to be comfortable, while she prefers to fly economy. The day before our trip, the airline canceled our flight and booked us on another. When we got to the airport, we discovered that Jada had been booked on one flight, and I was on a different one. Due to various complications, we ended up stuck in the airport for hours. This is common for a seasoned traveler, but I'd never experienced anything like it in my life. If I had been on a job, there would have

been a whole team of personal and studio assistants working ceaselessly to resolve the issue. Instead, Jada and I sat on the floor in a corner of LAX with nowhere to hide for ten hours. I was so uncomfortable—and so happy.

If not for Jada, I'd never have gotten to experience anything like this. Our journey forced me to break the habits and preferences of a lifetime. All the forces that had acted as a buffer between me and existence were removed. I didn't have to be Jet Li; I could just be a father sitting with his daughter. I felt a surprising relief at no longer being treated as special. The Jet Li who needed everything to be a particular way began to die, the brittle shell falling away to reveal something more tender and flexible.

When the airline finally found a flight for both of us, the only seat available for me was in economy. I had to laugh.

In Prague, Jada and I attended Mingyur Rinpoche's Joy of Living, Level II, course. In the European classes, there were more students from different countries and the age range was younger. Rinpoche taught about compassion and love. He invited us to begin with ourselves, then name someone we loved and were grateful for on whom we could focus our practice.

Jada said, "My dad."

I nearly broke down. I had been trying so hard throughout the trip to connect with her, but I thought I was failing. To hear her say she felt love and compassion for me as an object of her own practice moved me so deeply. *She loves me*, I thought. *She's open to knowing me. She's practicing and healing in the way that I practiced and healed.* I felt rewarded for my efforts.

By the end of the course, everyone's speech and behavior were visibly affected by Rinpoche's teaching. Our faces were brighter, our speech softer and clearer, our gestures gentler.

We were all inspired to turn our understanding of the power of kindness into action.

From Prague, Jada and I flew to France to spend some time in Paris before heading south to visit Lerab Ling, a large Buddhist temple. Although I'd shot two films in Paris, I'd always been surrounded by people and always been working. I'd been caught up in the habits of my small self: *What if people recognize me? What if my English isn't good enough to answer their questions? What if I get stuck in a conversation?*

Jada goes to sleep late and wakes up late, while I sleep early and wake up early. During those days in Paris, I'd wake up at five a.m., do my meditation, then stroll down the street to a café. I'd order breakfast and sit for hours until Jada came down to join me. Although I had previously lived in Paris for many months, this time as I drank my coffee and ate my toast, I just took in the city for the first time. I thought to myself, *Wow, I've never actually felt Paris. I've never watched the people wake up, buy their morning coffee and croissant, and head to work. I've never looked into their faces and imagined their lives.* I hadn't ever just been present to the sights, smells, tastes, and sounds of the city itself, making my sense experience an object of my training, too.

I felt as though I could enjoy life simply for the first time. I could just sit there and do nothing, and it was wonderful. Traveling with my daughter gave me the chance to taste everyday life. Before that, I wasn't brave enough to be an ordinary person outside of the comfort of my home.

After our stay in Paris, Jada and I continued on to Lerab Ling. Some of the Western disciples there had been practicing for over thirty years. At that time, I'd been practicing for about twenty-five years, and I was still occasionally complacent about my advanced status. But in this context, I was just a junior.

Many of them had been practicing since they were young and had even participated in impressive three-year retreats. Everywhere I looked, I saw Western people of all ages engaging in practiced, fluid Buddhist rituals. They knew how to offer mandalas with a complicated series of hand gestures, how to chant in Tibetan, and how to perform together on traditional Tibetan instruments for hours at a time. I'd never seen Westerners do this. I was shocked to acknowledge that many of these practitioners were on the level of the lamas I knew, they just weren't from Asian countries.

Every morning, Jada practiced diligently. As I watched her, I thought about the passage of the generations. I saw the chain of life stretch out before me: children becoming parents, students becoming teachers. Thanks to this journey, I'd been able to share so much of my life with her. Now she was traveling on her own path in the same spaces where I had traveled.

At the end of our journey, she told me, "I think I really see this as a way to be happy. I'm not happy yet, but I see a path toward it. It's something I can work on. I thought I would have to be medicated to be okay. But for the first time in a long time, real happiness seems possible."

Looking at her smile, I felt encouraged and comforted. If she hadn't called me back in April, I would have stayed in my cozy isolated world of self-retreat, with all my meals cooked for me, all my dishes washed, all my clothes cleaned. I would never have had the courage to break out of my prison of preferences and experience what normal life is like. As Mingyur Rinpoche often says, "Meditation without meditation is the best meditation."

Because of Jada's path, I walked out of seclusion and into the middle of the crowd. I surrendered. She and I had been classmates, roommates, companions in practice and in travel.

When she first called me, I thought I could give her some guidance and help. But through our journey together, she became more like a teacher to me.

My practice found me close to home, where the hooks are deepest. The transformation didn't come sitting alone in full lotus among incense and statues, but sitting with my daughter on the floor of LAX for ten hours waiting for our flight.

When we make all the materials of ordinary life, no matter how trivial or intimate or confusing, the object of our training, we are no longer divided within. As the uncompromising categories we used to split up experience and protect ourselves from discomfort soften, we find ourselves in the gray areas. Life is mostly made up of these gray areas, so what we are really doing is training to be at home in all of life. For many of us, it can require great courage to step out of our fortress of isolation and into the ever-flowing stream of change. This, too, is a death. The deep care we have for others is what breaks us out of the isolation of our self-centered thinking so we may find our inner quality of resilient openness. The more of life we face with an attitude of growth, the more our capacity to move through the world with ease and humor expands.

Two years on, my daughters and I are closer. Our argument in California stayed with me. I remember the rising anger in my chest and how I seethed in my bedroom afterward. I hadn't lost control of my emotions like that in a long time. Now I give myself another test: Let me face the world and see if anyone can hurt me that way again. When people say things that hurt me, I observe my reaction. I watch the sensations in my body and ask myself, *What is the emotion underlying the reaction? Is it worth getting angry? What could this person be going through to make them behave this way?*

I need this challenge because all four of my daughters have begun to tease me. It started with Jada, then Jane, and more recently, it has infected my two older daughters.

I tell them, “You used to be such well-behaved girls! You’re learning bad habits from your younger sisters.”

Now we banter together, everyone teasing everyone, both family and friends.

I watch my reactions, and I smile.

CHAPTER 10

BECOME A CHILD AGAIN





Recently I filmed a new action movie after a six-year break from making films. For all those years between movies, while I spent my time meditating, pursuing charity work, and nurturing my family relationships, I told myself, *I can still make a good action film, I just don't want to*. The prospect of shooting for nine days seemed easy; after all, I'd done it countless times before.

When I arrived on the set, I approached the process the same way I always had. For the first few days, we planned to rehearse the fight choreography, then move on to the dramatic scenes. Then, almost immediately, I got injured. We weren't doing anything complicated—this wasn't like the intricate, acrobatic routines of my youthful wushu demonstrations, or the hard-edged, knockabout stunts of my earlier career. I got hurt doing something I'd executed hundreds of times with ease. The crew had to push everything back by three weeks.

Damn! I thought to myself, *how embarrassing. Now all these people are waiting for me. Am I not who they wanted me to be?*

I was startled by the physical difference since my last film. When you're a young athlete, going from age twenty to twenty-five makes no difference. You have the same energy and skills. Whatever your mind wants to do, your body follows immediately. But going from age fifty-six to sixty-one is crossing from middle to old age. The truth is that in my mind, my body was the same as it always had been. I still saw myself as Jet Li, the

action star. But this time, when my mind told my body to do something, my body followed—after a few seconds. At age twenty, with proper training, it was easy to execute just about any movement. After sixty, if I want to execute a movement, especially a challenging one, I must prepare, warm up, and make a few false starts. I used to do ten moves in one second; now I need ten seconds to do one move. It was a completely different experience of control. On top of that, all the old weaknesses in my bones and joints asserted themselves, some creaking, some wobbling.

I recalled being on set for an earlier film where I performed alongside several action legends. They were over sixty-five, while I had just turned fifty. We would film an action scene, and afterward I'd watch as they went and sat slumped in their chairs, resting between takes, while I was full of energy. Most memorably for me, there was a scene where one of them had to kick in a door. The director filmed him standing in front of the door, kicking halfway, then called in a stunt double to execute the actual kick. As I stood on the sidelines, this sequence struck me. For all our behind-the-scenes knowledge of the various cinematic tricks involved to produce thrilling effects, action stars are still proud of their strength, vigor, and toughness, and I was no different. This was the sobering reminder: *Time humbles us all*.

Ten years later, sitting slumped in my chair, resting between takes on my latest film, I remembered this moment. One day I may need someone to kick in the door for me.

The changes to my body are undeniable. I'm slower, it takes me longer to recover from injury and exertion, and there are fewer and fewer positions in which I can be comfortable. Sometimes it feels like everything in my body hurts. The simplest tasks can become difficult, even insurmountable: eating

and digesting a meal, getting a good night's sleep. Physical suffering has been one of the most enduring motivators of my spiritual life, and I've learned over the years to ride out the periods of challenge. When my ill health overshadows my happiness, I look into my heart to get back into balance.

After so many hours spent witnessing impermanence—of a breath, of a thought, of a season—I'm not distressed by aging. When you're young, it's easy to look at an old person and think, *That'll never be me*. But this is a delusion. Everyone goes through physical changes, and everyone dies. If we are blessed with a long life, we will grow old and get sick. This is the journey of human life. Unlike the disheartening transformations of my hyperthyroidism, the changes of physical aging are an inevitable part of life to which we're all subject. My training helps me face each situation with respect and to let go of my attachment to what is passing away. Taoism teaches me to age like a tree—shedding leaves naturally. Buddhism reminds me not to mourn them.

I practice letting go not only of physical capabilities but of entire places. Last summer, I returned to see Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro in Garzê with my family. Standing in the biting air at the retreat center high up in the mountains, looking out over the rugged landscape that symbolized for me a refuge from worldly concerns, I was overcome with emotion. I knew I would never come back. Although I love these mountains and am inspired by them, my body can't take the trip: The altitude does me in. This place has nearly killed me several times already. I have to prepare extensively for every visit, and when I'm here, I can't breathe and I can barely move. My season reaching for these great physical heights is ending. Maybe in another life, I'll return as one of the young monks I envied and devote myself to

austere practice. Then again, maybe if I come back as a monk, I'll spend all my time wishing I was an action star.

Although I'm not at the end of my life, the end looms indisputably on the horizon. One day recently Jada came to me with her laptop and asked, "What do you want to happen when you die? Tell me, and I'll write it down."

"Just follow what it says in *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*," I said. "Hopefully you can find a Rinpoche to give me a proper ceremony."

"What about your grave and mom's?" Jada asked.

"To be honest, I don't know. Please, just do something simple. If I'm left to rest and cremated, that's fine. After that, do whatever is convenient for you. But remember your mother wants a traditional cremation. If I'm still alive, I'll help with the arrangements. If I'm not, then it's on you!"

I could tell it made Jada sad to contemplate my death, so I told her, "Don't worry about me. I will be happy if I die tomorrow and happy if I die in thirty years. I trust in who I am and how I've prepared for the end of this life. Wherever I am or whoever I am after I die, I truly believe I will be okay. So you take care of yourself and your mother."

Rather than let aging cast a shadow on my life, I practice instead letting it infuse my experience with a sense of preciousness for my present. When I spend time now with my family or speak to a young person who has just discovered meditation or sit in my garden listening to the birds singing in the trees, each moment that comes and goes shines with richness. The very draining away of my limited time keeps me from drifting off into fantasy or worry. Because I no longer hold moments with either a tight grasp or a careless attitude, time has become an old friend—I see it for what it is. My gratitude for this existence is boundless.

Due to the changes to my body, my goals are no longer as lofty as they once were. There are days where one of my goals is just not to be in pain. Having poured my energy into large projects, whether huge blockbuster films costing millions of dollars or complex international campaigns for charity, I now take comfort in a well-known saying on the lessening of ambition: When I was twenty, I wanted to change the world. When I was thirty, I wanted to change my country. When I was forty, I wanted to change my city. When I was fifty, I wanted to change my family. Now that I'm sixty, I want to change myself. And in changing myself, I change the world.

What does it mean to change yourself? Over my years of seeking true freedom, I've sometimes had the opportunity to experience a sense of no-self. This is an insight into the clear and immutable awareness that is the true nature of our minds. For those priceless moments when the whole story of Jet Li falls away, I feel an inner spaciousness beyond worldly concerns. In no-self, we have no name, no borders, because there's no one else who exists separate from us. We have no target, because there's no-self that finds a target to pursue. From the position of no-self, everything naturally arises as compassion, because we recognize innately that we're all one. When we even glimpse this deeper state, the small self will be a little more at ease, a little more willing to be quiet. Gradually the small self curls up in its corner of the room and the true master is revealed: awareness itself. In other words, there's no master at all. There's not even a room. This is how I understand being a boss today. When there is no master and no room, you're your own boss.

As I practice toward the realization of no-self, the swimming pool of the big self becomes like a lake gathered by a dam. Even if someone drops bags of smelly garbage into it, the

water is still clean. After more practice, the lake will become like the ocean. The larger the body of water, the more it can withstand without being disturbed. The less disturbance, the less I suffer.

Today I'm mostly somewhere between swimming pool and dammed lake, with intermittent bouts of the small bowl. But I've witnessed the spaciousness of my teachers' minds and heard the teachings of emptiness. When the mind rests fully in no-self, they say, it becomes as immense as the whole universe. It becomes space. There's no high or low, right or left, north or south. It's immeasurable. It can easily hold the nine planets and black holes. From the perspective of the vastness of the universe, nothing on earth is either good or bad as judged by our ordinary mind. Instead, the mind is like a mirror that reflects without grasping or rejecting. This is the full freedom of *zizai*: a state beyond the tyranny of likes and dislikes, where nothing is labeled. In *zizai*, everything simply is; everything is okay, not because it's justified or fair, but because the need to justify dissolves. The mirror does not judge. It sees without clinging, without anger, without the self that protests, "This should not be."

Conventional freedom is a rebellion—freedom from laws, from limits, from the weight of others' expectations. But *zizai* is freedom from the self that rebels. It is the end of the inner dictator that divides the world into "mine" and "not mine," "wanted" and "unwanted." Like *Guanzizai* who observes all with boundless compassion rooted in boundless ease, one who embodies *zizai* moves through life without resistance, meeting each moment as it comes, untouched by the illusion of control. Causes and conditions arise and pass; the mirror remains clear. This is not a freedom that can be pursued, only recognized—the way a child knows the sky before learning the word

sky. It is beyond life and death, beyond language, beyond even the concept of freedom itself. Zizai is the wisdom of no-self: vast, effortless, and utterly at home in the flux of existence.

The Buddha gave a teaching using the image of ice and water. From the perspective of no-self, everything is water and everyone is water—it's all the same water. But our conditioning teaches us that we should be ice: solid and separate. So it appears to the small self that the goal of life is to become stronger ice, harder ice, taller ice. People work their whole lives to become invulnerable ice. They build ice castles to live inside with all kinds of ice fences around them and never feel their true nature. But deep down, we are all the same water. The Buddha's teachings are designed to melt all the ice, slowly and thoroughly, until we reconnect with the truth of our nature as water. Then there is nothing to protect. We can just let go and go with the flow.

I like to think I live from this perspective most of the time. If you ask the people around me, though, they'll probably say I have a long way to go. I try my best, but sometimes I get angry. When my wife or one of my daughters has a problem, I still worry. Sometimes I forget I'm water and go back to thinking I'm ice. So I only have glimpses of no-self—only a small percentage of the time. After a lifetime of reaching for lofty goals, I still struggle with the gap between my own ideals combined with the expectations of others and what is realistic for me to achieve. This is where compassion comes in.

I admit I still have a lot of conditioning. When I try to work with my fears and desires, I notice another obstacle arising: perfectionism. As soon as I feel some relief from the small self, it brings up some past mistake from my memory. Then I relive the painful episode and blame myself. The small self speaks up again, saying, *Why didn't you do better? Why did you hurt*

that person? Why do you always mess up? I quickly forget my successes and focus only on my failures. This type of thinking resides in me very deeply, whether I am living from the small self or the big self.

Today I'm exploring how to accept my mistakes and even appreciate them. When I become aware of my tendency to be hard on myself for failing to reach a goal or reacting to a slight, I reframe the thought. Every choice I made brought me to where I am today. Even if I fell short, I usually acted out of a benevolent intention. And from the vast perspective of awareness, my mistakes are insignificant. Like a warrior negotiating peace between two warring factions, I defuse the conflict in favor of long-term reconciliation. Ending the fight within yourself is the ultimate wushu.

On the long road of spiritual practice, we are always students who have room for improvement. Through the kind patience of my teachers, I've learned to no longer expect unchanging perfection from myself. This has been a long and slow practice for me. When I was a child, my family expected me to save them. Later, it was my country. Then it was larger and larger concentric circles of humanity. Putting harsh pressure on myself, I made a heroic effort to offer compassion to all beings. In a sense, it took a global and even cosmic journey for me to come back around, learn to let go, and effortlessly offer compassion to myself.

I used to think compassion meant raising millions of dollars in philanthropy or delaying full enlightenment until all are freed, as the bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha vowed. Of course, I aspire to make an impact. But compassion is not always such a huge and abstract concept. It takes great compassion to lessen my own suffering. I can look inside, adjust my perspective, and seek to understand myself and the world as we are. If I gently

change my thinking, step by step, my happiness will last longer. I will move through the world with good health, ease, and humor. I am genuinely surprised at how good it feels to admit I'm imperfect.

In the movie *Hero*, my character was called Wu Ming, or Nameless. This is a great name for a character because ultimately it is everyone's name. No name can fully describe a person. A name is only a shorthand for a vast, complex, contradictory, ever-changing being who arises due to certain causes and conditions and then passes away due to others. However, the name Wu Ming is also a homophone for another Chinese word meaning "ignorance" or "without clarity."

In 2003, I arranged to participate in a public dialogue with the great Zen master Shengyen. We titled our talk, "Wu Ming versus Wu Ming." The title was intentionally ambiguous: Nameless versus Nameless? Ignorance versus Ignorance? Nameless versus Ignorance? And the joke was, who is Jet Li and who is Master Shengyen? As in the Karmapa's dream, the boundaries of identity blur and shift. But this joke also profoundly describes the rhythm of life for a Buddhist practitioner: Some days I'm Nameless, the unnamable water of unity; other days I'm Ignorance, seeing everything as the rigid ice of relative truth.

In offering myself acceptance for all my limitations and mistakes, recognizing that they are neither permanent nor essentially me, I take a step toward embracing my Buddha-nature. I have been given the rare gift of a human life, with both a susceptibility toward greed, hatred, and delusion and a capacity to awaken.

Aspiring to live as water in a world of ice, I notice a paradoxical goal as I age: the return to a childlike mind. Taoism teaches that the virtuous sage is like a newborn child: Her

bones are soft and her muscles are weak, but her grip is firm. Neuroscience has shown us that a child's brain is not fully formed. Unlike an adult's, a child's brain is still pliant and impressionable, so they live with a much greater sense of possibility. This means a child sees things from a unique perspective and catches the details adults don't see. Because they are not yet conditioned by socialization, a child doesn't wear a mask. There's no calculation in her behavior. She doesn't pretend to be happy when she's sad, or calm when she's angry; all her emotions pour out of her spontaneously. She screams, then laughs, then rages, then dances, in one continuous stream of expression. A child innately knows she's her own boss. When I think of this, I remember my daughter Jada's words at four years old: "My life is mine."

Children also haven't lost their sense of play. They move easily and instinctively between worlds of imagination, both believing wholeheartedly in their stories and impishly letting them drop and change. Where adults often fight for a lifetime to defend a single story about themselves, children cycle blindly through one identity after another, delighting in their permeability.

We can all aspire to be more like children, untethered by concepts, holding life lightly, releasing grudges and schemes, trusting our instincts to live in harmony with nature. This is one of the gifts of a life spent in practice. As time strips away our fear and attachment, the losses themselves can clear the way for an innate simplicity to reveal itself. When I recall the brightly joyful eyes and mischievous grins of my teachers, I see masters who have returned to this childlike state, embodying the seasoned wisdom to navigate life without losing the immediacy of their senses and the quicksilver movements of their emotions. After years spent building up their compassion and

wisdom until it became automatic and inherent in even their smallest gestures, they earned the privilege to act illogically, cutting across concepts to bring out the freshness and truth of the moment.

This is the adult's hard-earned return to the original freedom of a child. It's not ignorance, but wisdom stripped of complication and clinging: a child's heart in an adult's body. When we see beyond unyielding dualities like good and bad, proper and improper, young and old, we peer into the boundless source of being that flows beyond life and death and recognize ourselves.

• • •

TODAY, IN INTERVIEWS AND TALKS around the world, I'm trying to explain the power of the Buddha's simple teachings in an increasingly complex world. I'm doing my best, but I'll admit I'm not doing a great job yet. Countless invisible barriers arise in the most basic interaction—barriers of nationality, language, generation—and I don't know how to surmount them. Still, I hope that the experiences I've shared here—my struggles and persistence, failures and successes—will help you on your own journey toward lasting happiness. As my teachers shared their path with me, I offer mine to you.

My sincerest belief in writing this book is that each of us has the capacity to be truly free. You may have glimpsed the vein of gold ore within yourself or gazed longingly at the heavy clouds around your heart, hoping they concealed a shining sun. You may be rushing around serving countless bosses under countless names, or you may already be expressing the swagger that comes from knowing you're your own center of gravity. Whether you are happy with your circumstances or unhappy, remember that as one half of the taijitu rises, the other falls;

each contains a drop of its opposite. Life is a constant dance of mastery: balancing effort and surrender, wisdom and compassion, the child's wonder and the sage's perspective.

True freedom begins not with control, but with looking inward and offering compassion to whatever you find there, be it fear, longing, or buried brilliance. We often search for superheroes or gods to save us, not realizing the power we hold within. Yet freedom is not solitary. It asks us to end the fight within ourselves so we can meet the world without resistance, like a cloud floating effortlessly across the sky.

Wherever you are on your journey, there is a path for you, both timeless and unique, heroic and ordinary. Through courage, cultivation, and guidance, you, too, can discover the innate power in yourself to move through life with compassion and wisdom, letting everything die away that does not reflect the truth of your deepest nature.

Even if I could tell you how to become free, you'd still have to feel it for yourself.

May your sincere efforts benefit all beings.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The stories and reflections in this book trace my path as I've sought to move beyond the boundaries of life and death: from a willful, goal-oriented focus on the small self; through a broader pursuit of wisdom and compassion dedicated to public service for the benefit of all beings; to an immersive practice in making the teachings my own lived experience and going beyond self entirely.

I hope that everyone may learn to see both sides of the world. When our view widens and we recognize the dual nature of life, we begin to train ourselves to open our hearts more and more expansively, and to accept even the parts we once rejected. These, too, are part of the whole, part of what is truly “normal.” And I pray that Buddhists of every school will continue their practice with diligence to reach whatever goals they seek.

Some who study Buddhism are especially drawn to its cultural beauty. Yet if we speak of crossing to the far shore beyond birth and death, their journey is like boarding a great ship: slower than flying, but gentler and more comfortable. My hope is that those of us who seek liberation will keep their goal clear, without clinging to the vessel that merely carries us across.

Over the past decade, more than a dozen of my teachers have passed away. As I move into the sixth decade of life, I feel an even greater responsibility to share the wisdom and inspiration I was fortunate to receive from them. I pray that those guides who remain in this world enjoy long lives, and that

those who have gone may return again through the power of their vows.

I lost my father when I was only two years old. My mother's meager salary could not support our family, and we survived only with the help of government assistance. At eleven, I began formal work, which allowed me to continue my martial arts training while helping with our living expenses. I am grateful to my country for nurturing me, to my martial arts teacher Wu Bin and the many teachers and elders who guided me, and to directors Chang Hsin-Yen and Tsui Hark for the opportunities they gave me.

In public service, what began as a personal vow has, by the end of 2024, received more than 9.87 billion individual acts of donation and trust, raising over 4.79 billion yuan and helping to improve the lives of more than 52 million people. For this I thank my colleagues, volunteers, and donors of the One Foundation, and the larger One Foundation family.

I thank my wife for her love and companionship—for walking beside me so that we could grow not only as husband and wife but also as companions in practice. I thank my four daughters for their understanding and support.

I am also deeply grateful to those who helped bring this book to life and share it with readers around the world. To Jason Lin and Marc Gerald, who guided the work and helped find a publishing home for it in the Western market; to Jacob Surpin, Tracy Behar, and the publishing team, for their early belief in this project and their continued support along the way; and to Alexander Nemser, who helped give form to my experiences and translate my reflections into written language, allowing my voice to reach the page with clarity and heart.

On the path of seeking the Dharma, my greatest gratitude belongs to my teachers, whose guidance has inspired me, and

to the Sangha, whose companionship has sustained me. Without them, I would never have had the chance to study the teachings. What I have shared here is only a part of my almost thirty years of practice; beyond these pages are many more teachers and masters who have bestowed their compassion and wisdom upon me.

My life has been blessed with so many guides, teachers, and companions on the spiritual path. To all of them, I offer my deepest gratitude. With this book, I dedicate my thanks to them all.

Near the end of writing this book, doctors found a benign tumor in my neck that required surgery for removal in August 2025. The surgery and recovery reminded me that real experience teaches more than a hundred reflections on impermanence. Checking in with myself again and again days before the surgery up until I went under anesthesia, I realized I had no fear. It was the assurance that for me, dying is okay and living is okay—and if I live, I live for others.

May you treasure each breath, grow through each moment, and discover for yourself the path that leads beyond life and death.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jet Li is an internationally acclaimed martial artist, actor, and philanthropist. After rising to fame as a five-time national Wushu champion and starring in *Shaolin Temple*, he became a global icon through films like *Hero*, *Fearless*, and *Romeo Must Die*. Following a near-death experience in the 2004 tsunami, he founded the One Foundation to promote philanthropy and community giving. A student of Tibetan Buddhism for 30 years, Jet brings a lifetime of discipline, reflection, and spiritual insight to this deeply personal book.



Penguin
Random House
PENGUIN PUBLISHING GROUP

***What's next on
your reading list?***

**Discover your next
great read!**

**Get personalized book picks and up-to-date news
about this author.**

Sign up now.