

Moving Through Fear's Allure to Find Inner Peace – Akshay Nanavati – #871

Dave Asprey:

Today, we're going to talk about my favorite F word on Earth. And it's not the F word you think. If you're a longtime listener, if you're a member of the Upgrade Collective. By the way, thanks, guys for being in the live audience today. You guys can go to ourupgradecollective.com to join my mentorship group where I spend a lot of quality time with a group of people interested in biohacking, self-improvement. Well, my favorite F word that everyone hears about is fear because it's the one that gets our mind the most. The second most important would be food. Third most important would be the other F word that you thought I was talking about in the first place, which is clearly fertility, right? That's what you were thinking, wasn't it?

Dave:

All right, so we're going to talk about fear. And already there's a part of your nervous system that says, "Can I skip this one? I want to avoid it." Because we're wired to not do scary stuff. And our expert today is going to teach us some things. He's an introduction from Hal Elrod from Miracle Morning. He's a friend who said, "Dave, you got to talk to Akshay Nanavati because he was a drug addict, because he had PTSD from fighting in Iraq as a marine, depression, alcoholism, and was right on the edge of suicide." But said, I love this. He said, "F that." I just came up with that right now. I made the best working dad joke on Earth.

Dave:

Okay, I make myself laugh. He said, "F that," and went on and built a big old business. He's done ultramarathons, humanitarian work in post conflict zones, and he's gotten to mountains, to caves, to polar ice caps. These hostile environments, some which I've probably been in similar environments because I get attracted to mountains as well and caves. He also was like, "Screw the noise. I'll look into neuroscience, psychology, spirituality, and I'll write a book about fear," which is a hard book to write and your name Fearvana says it all. Akshay, welcome to the show.

Akshay Nanavati:

Thank you so much for having me, Dave. Real pleasure and honor to be here.

Dave:

When I said we're going to talk about fear, literally half the Upgrade Collective just hung up right here. [crosstalk 00:02:15]. I'm not sure what's going on with you guys. I'm kidding actually. One more jumped in is what really happened, so I'm just teasing them. I was going to pick on Betsy. I always pick on Betsy. All right.

Dave:

So, you seem like you would have a good take on fear because, well, you've done the PTSD thing, and I have to. I've been open about it. I don't talk about it on every show, but birth trauma is a major source of PTSD, and I see it all the time in 40 years of Zen. I've seen it in my own life being born with something choking you. The umbilical cord puts you in that fight or flight state, but it was no marine. I haven't had people shooting at me. Actually, I have had people shooting at me, but they missed, and that was just that one time, so nothing like your life, let's just put it that way. How did you get there to all the bad stuff? The war, the alcoholism, all the things, what did you have to do with that?

Akshay Nanavati:

It was my experience on the opposite end of fear of not having dealt with it that ultimately led me to it. So, what I mean by that is I was born to a good family. Great background, couldn't have asked for more. My family loved me. No sort of childhood trauma or anything like that. Born in India, moved around a lot, and when I moved to the US at about the age of 13 I got very, very heavy into drugs and to alcohol. I was very destructive. I still have these scars on my arm from cutting myself and burning myself, and was just on this very self-destructive path. Lost two friends to addiction-

Dave:

What kind of drugs are we talking about here and people say drug [crosstalk 00:03:57]?

Akshay Nanavati:

LSD, cocaine, and I was at a point that I would have done anything that came my way. I was looking for the PCPs, but thankfully more did not come my way because it was the same kind of person I am now of pushing the line I was that, but through drugs was my vehicle of expression. And so, cocaine and LSD were the primary ones. I mean, if you have a frame of reference I once took 18 hits of acid, which is absolutely absurd.

Dave:

At one time, not even spaced out over a day?

Akshay Nanavati:

I kid you not, one time. It was absurd.

Dave:

Wow.

Akshay Nanavati:

So, I was going pretty hard-

Dave:

That's not enough to kill anyone but most people would be pretty catatonic by that, but your receptors were so burned out that you're probably just chasing a little bit of a twitch visually, right?

Akshay Nanavati:

I mean, it was a dark day, that particular day to say the least. Yeah.

Dave:

Opposite of micro-dosing, I'm never recommending anyone do that.

Akshay Nanavati:

I would not. I would not either. Absolutely.

Dave:

Wow, because you're pretty heavy into it. The only guy from memory who's been that deep who's been on the show is Joe Polish. He's also been through a huge amount of pain and suffering and emerged on the other side to help a lot of people including me and he's a dear friend. Okay, so you're hardcore. And then you are self-harming. And then you said something bad happened in your family.

Akshay Nanavati:

So, well, no, not something bad happened in the family. I have actually lost two friends to addiction, and I was heading down. In fact, the one guy me and him we were the first two in our group to start going from alcohol and marijuana into harder stuff. He ended up going to heroin, ODED died, and I was heading down there. But the movie Black Hawk Down, which have you seen that movie?

Dave:

Absolutely.

Akshay Nanavati:

Very proud. That movie was the trigger that changed my life. It got me out of drugs, and into the Marines. And that's when I started to fall in love with fear, with pain, with suffering, with adversity, because obviously, Marine Corps training was hard. And having experienced the other side of that really loving Indian parents that tend to be a little bit on the overprotective side.

Dave:

Typically, yeah.

Akshay Nanavati:

Exactly. Now, getting out of that, and then going into the Marines and even joining was a challenge because I have a blood disorder that two doctors told me would kill me in Bootcamp. I have flat feet, I have scoliosis. So, all these biological defects that it took me about a year and a half to get the medical waivers to join, but once I fought my way into the Marines and going in, that's when I fell in love with the experience of the adversity and the struggle because bootcamp was terrifying. Everything about this was terrifying, but it was so alluring that I started to look for other ways to confront myself. Ultimately, to go to war with myself. And so, I started getting in outdoor sports. Every fear you can imagine and before this when I was a kid, I was terrified of Ferris wheels, let alone you know anything intense. Just a Ferris wheel scared me.

Akshay Nanavati:

Now, here I am exploring mountains, caves, skydiving, rock climbing, cave, you name it. Nature became my playground to explore my fears and ultimately systematically push through them one inch at a time. And after doing this for a few years then in 2007 I finally got the call to go to Iraq and I was waiting for this. I'd been volunteering. I wanted to go, and when I went I had a job that was unique. One of my jobs out there was to walk in front of our vehicles looking for the IDEs, the improvised explosive devices before they could be used to kill me and my fellow Marines.

Dave:

Aren't the vehicles supposed to be there to protect you from those things?

Akshay Nanavati:

They are. We did have... I forget what they're called now. We had the MRAPs and stuff but whenever we had a danger zone, so for example, a bridge was a concrete example because that's where they could plant IEDs on the sides or under it. Two Marines would walk out and clear the bridge before we'd wave the convoy through. I was one of those two Marines. So, needless to say, if somebody was going to get blown up, guess who would be?

Dave:

Yeah, that's a scary job. One of the guys who helped me get Bulletproof up and running, Zach, used to run marketing in the early days was a convoy commander, and man, he tells some stories, some nerves of steel you develop doing that kind of stuff. Were you seeking the adrenaline, the terror? Did you volunteer for that or did you just get assigned like you soldier go to the front, put on a [crosstalk 00:08:04]?

Akshay Nanavati:

I did get assigned that role, but it was something I was happy to fall into as well. I was seeking it. I wanted to experience the intensity of war. I mean, even joining the Marines when I saw Black Hawk Down and after watching it, I read book after book of military and life in combat, and there was one factor that the trigger initially that got me out of drugs and wanting to join was that scene in the movie, which again, based on a true story, when Gary Gordon and Randy Shughart, these two Delta snipers, they volunteered to come onto the ground knowing that thousands of armed enemy personnel are attacking the fallen Blackhawk, but they volunteer to go down anyway to protect one of their fellow soldiers, Michael Duran, and they ultimately died. And they received the Medal of Honor posthumously for their courage and their valor.

Akshay Nanavati:

So, watching that was what triggered me that what human being would have that courage to do that? And that and then delving deeper into understanding of war, what drew me to it, and again, not to sound sort of a war junkie, but there is something deeply alluring about the experience is that it forces you to experience the humanity at its most extreme. So you see the very worst. The awful atrocities, the horrors of war, but you also see the very best. You see things like what Gary Gordon and Randy Shughart did, sacrificing their lives for another human being. And it's only when you experience the intensity, the very edge of the human condition, can you go to those places and find something. And that was what was alluring to me about this experience.

Dave:

So, there are things like honor and valor and things that are honestly lost in the world. You don't see a lot of those things. You see them in the military. You don't see them in the government at all. I haven't seen it in a long time.

Akshay Nanavati:

You don't, absolutely.

Dave:

And so, those are the things that people who haven't been soldiers or spent some time learning from them don't understand. But Lieutenant Colonel Grossman was on the show, the guy who wrote the book, *On Combat*. I'm guessing you've probably read it-

Akshay Nanavati:

Yes, I have.

Dave:

... because of your background in neuroscience. He describes there's two kinds of people. There's people who they hear an explosion or gunfire, and they run towards it, because that's who they are. And then there's the other kind who says, "I'm afraid, I'm going to run the other way, I'm going to hide, I'm going to do the Mughal thing." Were you always one of those run towards the explosion things or are we running away from something else?

Akshay Nanavati:

Great question. So, when I went, it was a bit of both because to give the background about what happened before I went. So, when I first joined the unit, I joined my company, a weapons company, Third Battalion, 23rd Marines, and there was a buddy of mine, Neil, we came into the unit together, and we were volunteering to go to Iraq every chance we could get. We were the only two in the unit volunteering. And twice the Marines told us we were going, last minute they canceled it. And when we trained together, we became very close, we were like brothers. When we trained together, I would beat him by a second on the run, or a few seconds, or a point or two on the rifle range. So, we always had the sort of friendly competition thing going.

Akshay Nanavati:

One summer, this was after twice the Marine told us we're going, they cancel it. One summer when I had gone to vacation to India to visit my family he ended up finally finding a unit to go with. And what happened was because he was a good Marine, he was promoted to corporal, and he was placed in a vehicle that got hit with an IED, and he was killed. And so, in my mind, I always felt like I had no right to go on that vacation. I should have been there. I understand that rationally war happens the way it happens. You can't control how bullets fly, but in my mind because I beat him by a few seconds on the run, I should have been there, I should have gotten that promotion. Not because I was a better marine than me. He was an outstanding marine, far better than I was, but because I would beat him by a few seconds, I should have been in his seat, I should have taken that hit, and he should have come back home to his family.

Akshay Nanavati:

When I went to Iraq, I went out there with this mentality that if somebody... And again naively because you can't control what happens in war, but I went out there saying that if somebody has to die, it'd rather be me. In fact, just the other day, I was opening up my Iraq journals and reading it, and because I was writing it for a project, and I went out there with this mentality that let it be me. So, in some sense, I was running away from the guilt of the fact that I had not gone with him. And then the other sense, I was also chasing this high, chasing into the firefight. I mean, we were Marines. There were so many instances when we see bullets, and like a normal human being would be like, and us Marines are like, "Where are they?" We're chasing it down, looking for it.

Akshay Nanavati:

So, it was a combination of the two. And even at that point, my risk tolerance was very high. Because before I had gone to Iraq, I used to free solo up rock walls. I used to climb rock walls with no rope. So, I had been pushing the edge so far that it took a lot more. When you push the edge, the inevitable result of that is it takes more to activate the same response of fear of a liveliness than it would somebody else who hasn't gone that far into the edge. And so, it's a dangerous line, of course, but by the time we got to Iraq, so things like walking in front of the vehicle, terrifying job, it didn't activate as much fear in me as one would think. Because I had built that tolerance.

Akshay Nanavati:

And so, I was playing on both those edges. Not very consciously, at the time. Now looking back, I'm very self-aware about what was going on. But I was doing a bit of both. I mean, when I went out to Iraq, I gave away all my stuff. I wasn't expecting to come back alive, which needless to say, when I came back, and I was like, "I need to get my stuff back." That made it a little awkward, but I'm back. But yeah, I was ready to, and it wasn't suicidal. It's not that I wanted to die. But I was ready to, and I didn't have a plan what to do when I came back.

Dave:

You've lived these fearful experiences. We'll talk about some of the other stuff you've done. But you've also looked at the neuropsychology and neuroscience of fear and all, and ultimately what I learned in the temples in Nepal and Tibet, and even some of the shamanic studies that I've done, it's that ultimately all fear is just fear of death. It's fear of your meat dying. Do you believe that given all you've experienced and all you know or is there something else to the fear that we have?

Akshay Nanavati:

I think if we dig deep into the evolutionary construct behind any kind of fear, that is what it leads to because at the core the brain is not concerned about our happiness and our wellbeing. This archaic caveman-like brain is concerned about our survival is its number one primary concern. So, with that said, I think digging deep into the evolutionary construct, I think, that is where it all leads to. But with that said, the fears will show up very differently.

Akshay Nanavati:

So, as a very concrete example, like the other day I reached out, and I asked this girl out. That to me was more scary than doing the things I do, which could literally kill me. I'm training to go to Antarctica, and my friends find it hilarious. They're like, "Dude, you do the most insane things. You've spent seven days in darkness. You run 24 hours. You're going to Antarctica," which could actually kill me. I'm like, "I got this." Asking a girl out on a date, terrified, anxiety, butterflies in my stomach. You know what I mean? And I understand-

Dave:

Do you steel have that?

Akshay Nanavati:

I do. I felt it when I reached out. Shooting a text message to a girl online is more scary. I feel more fear than knowing that I'm about to go to Antarctica in four weeks. It's absurd. And at the core, again, if we

look, dig deeper in that fear, what is it? Fear of rejection, which could mean being ousted from the tribe, which in evolutionary times means death. So, at the core, that's what it leads to. But yet, I'm on a very practical level. I'm less scared or... And it's not that I'm less scared of dying, but I'm more comfortable with the experience of death.

Akshay Nanavati:

I am terrified of dying. But that's a comfort that I have with playing on those edges, whereas the "normal mundane thing", it's more terrifying to me. So, if that makes sense, the fear of death is at the core, but that doesn't mean it always shows up in that way. The normal fears can be more scary, and it's going to be different to everybody. Other people will probably be much more terrified about going to war. Or if somebody said go to war tomorrow, I would be ready, crushing it. I've got this. So, it shows up differently.

Dave:

Most of the former soldiers I know would say the same thing. Yes, it's scary, but there's something there that's [crosstalk 00:16:17]. They know how to do it. It's kind of in their bones.

Akshay Nanavati:

Absolutely. It's a very addictive and alluring experience as messed up as that might sound.

Dave:

There's at least in my world, fear starts inside the cells. There's a different consciousness, and this is sub-cellular psychology. There's a whole field emerging on that. There's a part of yourself that says, "Oh, my God, I'm just a cell. I'm part of this network of other cells." Then eventually, all the cells kind of vote. Oh, look, this big piece of meat flops around and does stuff. I'm not saying that's all we are. But I'm saying a major part of fear comes from that.

Dave:

I think the fear of asking women out or men depending on whichever way you're going. The tough thing is not just is my meat going to survive? For that F word, is the species going to survive? Because the dumb little, whether it's a bacteria or lysozyme, some little part of your thing that you didn't pay attention to. It is absolutely convinced that if you don't ask them out, or if you fail in asking them out, that the species will die. So, it's not even about you. It's about the tribe is going to die if I just don't... And it's also the same reason that a lot of guys have ejaculation soon problems because those little bacteria are like, "You better get that thing pregnant right now."

Akshay Nanavati:

That's right.

Dave:

It's a whole fight against fear that drives us. So, that might be the one time I would say fear isn't fear of you die? It's fear of everyone dying because you don't have sex. How dumb is that?

Akshay Nanavati:

Yeah. Perpetuation of the species. Yeah. Again, all reasonable fear. So, it makes sense in a way, and that's the key thing. Even with the assessment of those fears, that's why I don't like the idea of irrational fears. All fears have their place, they show up for a reason. It's the assigning of a judgment around the fear that causes us more problems. I get terrified of this, that, and the other thing, and I could not care less when fear shows up. What matters to me is what I do with it once it does. And by dis-identifying from it as this thing that envelops me, or judging it as irrational or rational, or bad or good or anything of those sorts, I can let go of the construct I have around the fear, accept it for what it is, and then choose what I want to do outside of it.

Dave:

Wow. All right, that makes sense. You've conquered most of your fear. What's cool is you're admitting I still have some that don't even make sense. But like you just said, fear doesn't make sense. It's an emotion. If emotions are rational, they'd be thoughts. To me, I didn't hear that till I was 30, and it changed my life to hear that really like, "Oh, that explains so much." Because before that, I would say, I am not afraid because there's no reason to be afraid. And then whatever that feeling of anxiety was, it couldn't be fear. And so, it puts you in a little cage.

Akshay Nanavati:

Exactly.

Dave:

These are hard things to talk about, but I thought you'd be really good at it because you wrote a book on it, and you studied it, and you've experienced these things. There's something that attracted me as well is I spent four days in a cave. Frankly, because I was afraid that I'd eat something if I was trying to fast for four days. And also, I knew that I would act like a total jerk and get hangry and hypergly-bitchy. So, I was afraid of that.

Dave:

All right, put me in a cave, no people, no food. And I'm just going to face the fear of loneliness. And I'm going to face the fear of hunger at the same time, and that was my last book. I've been attracted for years to do something called Vajra Armor, which is meditation in darkness, usually for 10 days. It's like an advanced form of Vipassana of just finding 10 days to be in the dark, much alone 10 days for me right now is a little challenging, but you did seven days in darkness. Why? Where? How? Tell me.

Akshay Nanavati:

Sure.

Dave:

You did seven days in darkness? Why? Where? How? Tell me.

Akshay Nanavati:

Sure. What drew me to it initially was so I went through a very, very challenging divorce a few years ago, and at this point I'd sobered up written my book, business was going well, life was going good. Went through this experience and I broke my sobriety and everything I do, I do it hard. So, I got to a point where I'm downing literally three 750 milliliters of vodka a day and going on for five. I still remember I'd

be throwing up over a toilet, throwing up, and then picking up the bottle to drink right after I'm done. So, going into a very dark space.

Akshay Nanavati:

Obviously, something was missing. So, I wanted to go... At this point I've done, like run ultras. I've done a lot. And so, I was like, "I got to go deeper within to find some answers." And so, I was actually going to go do a Vipassana, the 10 day silent retreats. I didn't know darkness retreat was a thing. And when I was doing some research, I stumbled into this concept of a darkness retreat. And that to me was far more appealing than a Vipassana because unlike a Vipassana where in a Vipassana your eyes are open. So, when you shut off the visual sense, which is one of the primary ways in which we engage with the world, you have nowhere external for your consciousness to go. So, I can't look at the thing and say, "That's a door, that's a wall." I can't go anywhere outside. I have to go within.

Akshay Nanavati:

That's inevitably a challenging intense journey. But therefore the insights that will come from that will be far more profound. So that was the draw to it, why I went there. I went to a place in Germany, this darkness retreat in Germany. And the way it works logistically, you're in this tiny little room, pitch darkness, can't see your hand in front of you darkness. You can choose three options. You can do water, food, or smoothies. I did a pure water fast. I did the middle ground because I'm an ultra-runner, so I'm pretty skinny anyway, and I was going to come out and keep training. I didn't want to lose too much more weight. So, I did just smoothies. And they bring the smoothie three times a day at various times, and they'll ring a little bell and you hear the bell and the hallway is dark, too, so you'll come out and grab your food. And other than that, you have nothing to do. You're literally sitting in a dark room.

Akshay Nanavati:

I also actually, all of these journals are next to me because I was literally typing these out. I had a journal in the dark. I was journaling. And inevitably people ask how? So, I had a ruler and would write and move it down. And obviously it wasn't in the lines, but it was legible for the most part. And the stuff that came through was deeply profound. So, you see lights pretty much from day two into the darkness because your brain they say in that extended period of darkness releases DMT, which, as you of course know is one of the primary ingredients in Alaska. And so, you're seeing these light shows that are intense. I mean, the brightest white light I've ever seen in my entire life was when I was in the darkness after five days. I literally was touching my eyelids like this because I couldn't tell if they were open or closed. I was covering my eyes, sitting in a dark room seeing this bright light.

Akshay Nanavati:

Six days into the darkness, I had this, the very intense light show where I was lying on the bed, and my arms were locked out like this. And I literally felt like I couldn't move them, they felt paralyzed. I'm looking at the ceiling, and I'm seeing these red and green lights kind of like stars in the universe. And they're just this magical experience. I was moved to an experience of absolute awe at the highest level, tears coming down my face. And every time they would fade I would just repeat to myself, please God helped me go deeper. And God knows how long this was because, of course, I had no sense of time, and these intense meditation experiences. But even in my journaling I was finding answers to... And I'm not saying my answers are the right answers. But questions like about the nature of enlightenment. Why are we here? What does God? My expression of what is my version of God? And also going deeper into understanding what led me to those places like breaking my sobriety.

Akshay Nanavati:

I confronted a lot of things. Like one thing I've always faced and to some degree, it's still there, but I'm much more aware of it, so now it doesn't control me is this constant guilt about why do I get this life? Just because I was born, where I was born, I'm instantly blessed with 100 times more opportunities, 1,000 more times opportunities than many other people. A few weeks before the darkness retreat I had gone to do this run across Liberia and doing some humanitarian work out there. And I remember when I was running I met this kid who had lost his mom in the war, his father had left, he was living with this other kid in the village in Liberia. He wanted to go to med school. Odds of that happening were damn near zero. What was the difference? That kid was born where he was born. And as a result of that, he's born into a world of darkness and struggle that I didn't do shit to deserve the world I was born into.

Akshay Nanavati:

And so, I'd always struggled with being happy because why do I get to be happy when there's so many other people in pain? That stuff showed up into the darkness and I was able to process it, understand it, deal with it. And ultimately, I mean, it took still work after it. You don't have one magic aha and everything changes. You have to constantly practice it and implement it in order for the long term effects to last, but a lot of that stuff showed up that was really game changing for me, but to be honest with you, Dave, the most profound part of the darkness retreat was coming out of the darkness after seven days, and seeing the light.

Akshay Nanavati:

I mean, when I took off that mask and the way you see the light after seven days in dark, I mean, no words can describe what I saw and how I saw it in those moments. But the two thoughts that ran through my mind was one was, I wish I could see the world every day through these eyes, which inevitably, you can't, and it returns to the status quo that it was used to although you have opened a new door that you can now access. But the second thought was this visceral gratitude and knowing that you can never really see the light that way unless you have been in the dark.

Akshay Nanavati:

And so, I felt this deep sense of gratitude for every bit of pain and suffering and misery I've experienced in life because only by going into those spaces of darkness, only by opening those doors of pain was I able to access something else. And so, only by opening the doorway into the dark that could I find this window into a light that I had never experienced before. And it was a visceral knowing of that, not just a rational idea of it. Just this deep knowing. I was again moved to tears seeing the light that way, and that was awe-inspiring. I mean, it's hard to even describe what that moment was like.

Dave:

Was that a transcendent spiritual experience? Or was that a coming out of fear experience?

Akshay Nanavati:

I would say it's a bit of both. I think they can coexist. Like, if I had... In one word, if there was one word to summarize what showed up in the darkness was self-transcendence. Transcendence was the one word. I mean, when somebody recently asked me what is life about in one word? The word to me is transcendence. So, without a doubt it was a transcendent experience. But it began with confronting my fear of stillness, my fear of the loneliness having just gone through this divorce, my guilt. But I think these experiences can all coexist. It doesn't have to be one or the other.

Dave:

How in the heck did you get the Dalai Lama to write the foreword for your book?

Akshay Nanavati:

That was a huge honor and a tremendous blessing as you can imagine.

Dave:

I think it is. We've been trying to get him on the show forever.

Akshay Nanavati:

It was just a cold pitch. I just reached out to... But even to what started that was initially I remember when I wrote Fearvana, it's a very spiritual concept, so I was like who's... And I started off with no brand, no platform, unknown. Nobody knew my name or anything, nothing. So, I was like, all right, who's the spiritual leader of the... Who's the most spiritual well-known person to validate this concept? The Dalai Lama. So, I was like, "All right, why not?" But first time that thought entered I was like, "There's no way. Who am I?" All that good stuff that shows up in our brain. Who am I, the doubt, all that things showed up, and I was like, "There's no way it could happen." And then later on I was like, "Okay, why not try it? What's the worst?"

Akshay Nanavati:

I reached out first to his email, to his form on this holiness' website, got nowhere, did tons of research. Found a name and email address of a person in His Holiness' office. I shot a personal video for him sharing my journey, what Fearvana is, the mission, the concept. This monk connected me to three other monks. Finally, found the right person, and for five months of building relationship with this particular monk, and why I think the lesson is valuable is here is that the whole time when I would reach out to him, finally he got my video and a letter I wrote to him. He said, "Okay, we got your stuff, we'll review it, we'll get back to you." In two weeks, three weeks, four weeks, you don't hear back. In your mind where do you start going, right? Oh, they hate me. They're not going to review my book. Why would they do this?

Akshay Nanavati:

You're feeling all these thoughts, but I was at this point able to dis-identify my thoughts as a thought and follow up anyway. Just because the doubt is there, just because the fear is there, just because the who am I feeling is there I don't have to listen to it. So, I would follow up anyway, follow up anyway, build a relationship. And after five, six months of building relationships with monk and reaching out and sharing, he wrote me back saying, "Considering everything you've been through and your genuine desire to serve, I'll press your case." I was truly honored I ended up getting this signed letter from the Dalai Lama with His Holiness, a seal, and his signature, that we've now framed up in the house. I didn't ask for a foreword. I just asked for a one liner, but he wrote the foreword for the book. I mean, spiritually, and for me, it was just a huge blessing and an honor, but obviously for the marketing of the book a game changer, too, for an unknown author to have that.

Dave:

Sure.

Akshay Nanavati:

I was very humbled that that happened.

Dave:

He's done that for other books that are unknown. I've spoken to two people who he's written forewords for, and one he's cooked dinner for him.

Akshay Nanavati:

Wow.

Dave:

It's always interesting stories. But it's funny that description of the thoughts that run through your head, maybe they hate me, maybe they don't like me, but I'm going to press ahead. Salesforce.com exists because of that. When they were seven or eight guys as a very small startup. This is customer relationship management software. I worked on some of their infrastructure because they were a customer of this company where I made 6 million bucks that I then lost in my 20s. So, I just remember in early conversation, they're describing this stuff. And when it comes down to is all people have that fear, including salespeople who are experts at that fear, but they still have a hard time with it. So, you have a system that pops up, it goes time to bother the customer again. They'll do what the system says without having to think through the fear.

Dave:

What you did though is you had enough resilience, and enough stick-to-it-iveness that you said, "I'm just going to set aside the fear. And then I'm going to go and I'm just going to ask and ask and ask and do what's necessary until you get through." Did the energy to do that, did that come from the same energy that let you go into combat and let you do these other things? Was this some a learning? Where did you get that because most people don't have... Most people would have given up where you did [inaudible 00:30:45].

Akshay Nanavati:

It was an evolution of the self that led me to that ability to dis-identify from what is in order to become something more. It was an evolution of the self that led me to that ability to dis-identify from what is in order to become something more, which really began when I hit that rock bottom after the war when I was struggling with PTSD, with depression, and was on the verge of taking a knife and slitting my wrists after five days of binge drinking. It wasn't like a magical aha. That moment of suicide was rock bottom. That was the beginning of the climb out. But it wasn't a smooth climb. It was a rocky climb out of this abyss.

Akshay Nanavati:

But what finally got me out of that place was the same thing that led to this resilience was the ability to dis-identify with my... So, for example, I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, right? But what I came to learn is that posttraumatic stress is very different than posttraumatic stress disorder. I had posttraumatic stress, but the attachment of the word disorder completely changes the dynamic of it. So, I was jumpy with loud noises. I struggled with crowds. I felt survivor's guilt. These were all things that they, the outside world told me more symptoms of PTSD.

Akshay Nanavati:

Now, when I came to... When I studied the neuroscience of the brain, and all of this stuff, and I was learning to initially heal myself, and then obviously, take that knowledge to be of service to others was that being jumpy with loud noises was a very normal human response to war. My brain learned to say loud noise equals death, so you better be alert. So, inevitably, I was more hyper vigilant than the average person. So, by dis-identifying from saying that, "Look, I have posttraumatic stress, but not posttraumatic stress disorder. I can be jumpy with loud noises, but that doesn't mean there's anything wrong with me. Survivor's guilt is not the enemy." We were talking about this earlier that fear, stress, anxiety, guilt, none of these emotions are "bad emotions."

Akshay Nanavati:

Again, rationally I got that a war happens the way it happens. But what I learned to do was dis-identify from the guilt, which doesn't mean it went away. I still felt it, but I learned to by dis-identifying from it, I used it. And what I did was I actually put a picture of my friend Neil up on my wall. For a long time I had this picture and it said, "This should have been you, earn this life." My guilt became my fuel. My guilt became my ally. So, these experiences led to my ability to say that, "Look, you are not your thoughts, you're not your feelings, you're not your experiences. You are the thinker of your thoughts, the feeler of your feelings, and the experienter of your experiences."

Akshay Nanavati:

And through that dis-identification, I was able to... And I'm not perfect at it. There are odd times where we all get caught up in our thoughts and our feelings, but especially now I'm very good at being able to dis-identify, and that's what allowed me to say, "Hey, I'm feeling this doubt, but it's not real. Let the mind do what it does, who cares? Who do I want to become instead?" And always recognizing that, and even at a deeper level, this is also fundamental to acknowledge and to realize that there's no inherent self to find. When you start recognizing that you can start saying that it's not about what is, it's about who I want to become. There's only a self to create.

Akshay Nanavati:

So, by acknowledging that in some ways we're not so much human beings as we are human becomings I can always say it doesn't matter what is, what all that matters is what I want to be. And therefore, in this act of creation, I get to separate myself from even my own biology which is limiting in a way. This blood disorder, this flat feet, this [inaudible 00:34:03], but I can separate from myself and become something more. That's a skill that constantly you have to work on. Otherwise, you can get caught up in the perceptions of what you believe to be real, which is your thoughts and your feelings. And that can consume you if you don't dis-identify from it.

Dave:

What's scarier, asking the Dalai Lama to write something for your book or asking a model out?

Akshay Nanavati:

I would say for me asking a model out.

Dave:

Thank you. So, the absurdity of that.

Akshay Nanavati:

That's right.

Dave:

To everyone listening, this is what fear does. It's totally not rational. It does not have to make sense. And you're a guy who's summited mountains, and survived combat, and done all this stuff. And of those two things, and I don't think the answer is necessarily the same for everyone, but you're not alone there. And so, if we believe our fear, we're kind of idiots at the end of the day, and right now given all the strange fear-based manipulation going on in the world, now is more important than ever to get to the core message on your book, which is you think people can fall in love with fear, and stress, and anxiety, because that leads to fulfillment. So, you actually choose fear or I have new clothing line that came out of the conference called choose danger.

Dave:

Literally, yes, I will choose to do dangerous things like drive because it was worth. We are doing that. But if we instead fall into that weird picture in our mind, it doesn't work. But every time you save fear, people turn away. But then every time... Actually, they don't turn away. If you say feel fear, they'll turn towards it to pay attention. But if you say experience and think about fear, they'll turn away. No one wants to actually consider it, but you always look at it. It's got that weird attraction and repulsion at the same time, so you can use fear in marketing. People do it all the time. In fact, the very first marketing was all fear based, all the propaganda that came out of Germany that became the basis of public relations was fear based, but you can't say fear without some bad thing. Do you have a neuroscience or a spiritual view on why it's both attractive but once we think about it, we run away?

Akshay Nanavati:

Yeah, on the one hand, when fear that's why it's so primary marketing, that's why it's leveraged as a weapon, essentially, whether it be politicians or brands, or whoever. There's a great book called Brandwatch that talks about fear based marketing, because number one, because what it does on a neurological level, it simplistically speaking shuts down the connection between the animal brain, the limbic system and the prefrontal cortex, what I call the human brain versus the animal brain. So, it shuts down that flow so you're no longer thinking rationally. Fear, because in a life or death scenario when fear shows up, you don't want your human brain, like if a fish shark is attacking you, you don't want to be thinking, what should I do now? You want to respond instantly, right?

Akshay Nanavati:

So, it shuts off, again, simplistically speaking, the gate of attracting stimuli so you can purely focus on the battle, the thing in front of you. That's why it can be leveraged as a weapon. But on the flip side, and this is the dualism that exists is that novelty is something we seek. Novelty produces dopamine, it helps create anandamide, which is a neurochemical substance based on the Sanskrit word Ananda, which literally means bliss, the endorphins, the adrenaline. So, on the one hand, we seek novelty, on the other there's this discomfort, and this stuff because it reduces us back to the survival mechanism, right?

Akshay Nanavati:

And so, what we need to do in order to not let fear be used as a weapon is to accept this dual nature of it. At the core of it, and I've been hinting at it is everything is around this. It's a concept that I call singular dualism. And the idea of it is in life there exists all these dualities that are seemingly opposite,

these sort of polarities like darkness, light; life, death; there's masculine, feminine; ego, humility; contentment, discontentment. There's all these dualities, and we often frame them as enemies. One side is the enemy. Fear is bad, or pain is bad, pleasure is good. We frame one side is bad, and that's the fundamental problem is that. And as I think was F. Scott Fitzgerald who said, I forget the exact quote, but something along the lines of that the mark of intelligence is the ability to accept two conflicting thoughts at the same time and accept them as real. So, we can accept these two conflicting ideas and see that they're actually one. And that's why I call the singular dualism.

Akshay Nanavati:

And so, the idea even when it comes to fear is that, one, accepting that it has this nature that will drive us into survival paralytic if we don't separate ourselves from it, and then two, also acknowledging that it is the vehicle to greater growth. Because, I mean, at the very, again, simplistically level, if you want something you've never had before in life, if you want to reach somewhere you've never reached, you have to do something you've never done. And inevitably, when you do something you've never done, when you take a risk, your brain is going to respond with fear because your brain is wondering, "Is this thing going to kill me, right?" So, it's a natural evolution in order to attain that next awakening, that next growth, you have to move through fear. But to do that, you got to let go of the judgment, you got to be able to identify it.

Akshay Nanavati:

Neuroscience has actually shown simply by identifying the emotion, labeling it, I'm feeling fear that it reduces activity in the emotional parts of the brain and increases activity in the parts of the brain, in the prefrontal cortex related to focus and awareness. So, simply by acknowledging, by labeling, by accepting the isness of that fear, we can then create the space to transcend it and that space is everything. As Viktor Frankl puts it more profoundly than I ever could, between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space lies our power to choose our response. And in that response lies our growth and our freedom. So, it's that space between stimulus that shapes us.

Dave:

So well put. There's something I want to address that that you say really elegantly in your book. There's a certain, actually a couple organizations that are into flow states through near death. Extreme sports and people who have been on my show for a while know I'm talking about Steven Kotler and Jamie Wheal, and that is not all of them, either one of them is into, but it's kind of is a ski faster than is really safe, and mountain bike really faster. And if you don't die, you have a transcendent experience. And there's other ways like service to achieve a flow state. But you talk about how you believe you could only get the high by living on the edge of life and death. And is the high that you were seeking just a flow state, and it's one that you're still getting now by reading books that help people or was there something else going on there?

Akshay Nanavati:

It was a flow state for sure. But I do think there is... So, yeah, there is this experience of a flow state. But I think by playing on those edges, you also, it expands your paradigms and your constructs about what is possible for the world, for yourself, for humanity. And playing on those edges, it makes life so much more alive. You feel all in a much deeper way when you dance on these edges. And so, there's a draw to that because in the mundane there's these masks we put on. There's a construct. When you go beyond those constructs, when you push so far into pain or pleasure, it sheds it all and you find something

you've never found, and that's why like coming back to what I was saying earlier about the appeal of war. When you experience humanity at that level, it's so real. There's a purity to pain. There's a purity to suffering that is very alluring, that again, it breaks down the masks, the facades we put on in the day to day human experience, and reveal something deeper.

Akshay Nanavati:

That's the draw and not just playing on the edge of pain but playing on all the edges all of these dualities. I call it like dancing with duality, dancing on the edge of every duality. So, to concretize this I realize I'm obviously someone who seeks suffering. Obviously, as an ultra-marathoner, that's really all it is. So, I realized though that I was feeling suffering in day to day, and all of life was becoming this experience of suffering. So, I was like, "Okay, let's practically apply this idea of singular dualism." And if we look at suffering and play as a duality, I would go ham into the other edge of play. By doing that, I'm now... Because if you do always what you've done you're going to think the same way because we all are limited by our mental models of the world no matter how self-aware we are, we're ultimately thinking from the constructs, the mental models, the belief systems that we are operating from.

Akshay Nanavati:

So, when I go ham into the other edge, suddenly I'm opening new doors that I've never opened before, and now I'm always going to be someone who will lean on if we look at the duality of suffering and play, always someone who will lean on the edge of suffering, but by opening the door into play, I can bring new lessons into suffering as well as just experience new avenues of life that I haven't before. And so, it does produce this flow state, and I guess that varies, is very much connected to the aliveness, but I just think it just feels more real. You feel more connection, which is I think also at the core of so much of what we seek is connection to ourselves, connection to the universe, connection to God connection to each other, and you feel more connection to all that is when you are playing on those edges and that's a huge draw.

Dave:

I believe there are different types of flow and we'll figure out the neuroscience or neurochemistry behind those at some point, but the flow from stopping thinking about stuff because if you don't, you'll die is definitely a form, but [crosstalk 00:43:32]-

Akshay Nanavati:

Yeah, so is writing. Writing a book is-

Dave:

Writing, creativity-

Akshay Nanavati:

Exactly.

Dave:

... public speaking. And not that in public speaking I'm in flow because I think I'm going to die but just because serving others puts you in a state of flow, but I think it's a different flavor of flow.

Akshay Nanavati:

Yeah, I would agree.

Dave:

You can have French fries versus broccoli. It's a real food, but they're not the same.

Akshay Nanavati:

They're beautiful. That's why I love experiencing it all. That's why I like do things like darkness retreats, business, writing, speaking, playing, mountaineering, all of it allows you to experience the different flavors of it.

Dave:

For sure, and people haven't done how to mountaineering. There's physiological stuff that's happening with oxygen, and if you're doing... At least some of the stuff I've done there's I might actually freeze to death tonight if I don't do things, so that is usually highly motivating, and focusing, and things like that.

Akshay Nanavati:

For sure.

Dave:

In fact, I had some of that the day I had Yak butter tea for the first time. I was on 30 mile an hour winds, and couldn't find the path to the next guest house, and didn't have any guide with me. I'm like, "Wow, this is really bad. And I don't have my sleeping bag to even stay warm because it's being carried by someone else somewhere else." That was one of the things where it's not terror, but it's just an awareness, well, I better keep walking.

Akshay Nanavati:

Yeah, that's intense.

Dave:

It's not as intense probably as some of the stuff you've gone through, but just that sensation and I can remember what it did to my mental state, which is why I bring it up. One of the things that I've made a practice in my life once I discovered that that fear and anxiety was playing a massive role in the way I behaved in the world that I had been unaware of, I'm just going to experience everything that I'm afraid of until I'm not afraid of it. Exposure therapy, or there was a guy who talked about rejection therapy quite a while back on the show, which is a really good episode, you should actually listen to it. He talks about [crosstalk 00:45:26] getting people to say no, until he wasn't afraid of asking. But do you recommend that? I mean, should we go out there and just seek all the things we're afraid of, so that we can experience it and just show our bodies, hey, we didn't die, maybe you don't have to be afraid of it. Is that the path you're talking about?

Akshay Nanavati:

I do think there's value in doing that because it builds confidence. I've become a very confident person. I don't say that with any ego, but because I've pushed through so many fears. Confidence is essentially doing hard things, learning from it, and coming back. And then it's also the very important part is how

you talk to yourself after you do those hard things. Because one can do hard things and still beat themselves up and self-flagellate themselves, but doing those hard things, acknowledging the awareness and insights from it, and coming back to reshaping yourself. So, I do think there's value from it. But I also think it's important to seek out your own worthy struggle. That's what I call it. I think your path is... Everybody's got a worthy struggle. It doesn't have to be running ultras, or climbing mountains, or skiing in Antarctica, it can be playing the guitar, it can be playing chess. I have a friend who's a grandmaster in chess.

Akshay Nanavati:

The idea is pushing your line in your way and your flavor of what you want to do. Now, I choose to be this polymath in seeking different ways. I'll inevitably never be the best mountaineer because I'm playing in different arenas. But that's for me, I like to play in those arenas and experience all the different flavors. There's others who I know are masters, the best mountaineers. They just stay in that one lane, and one craft, and that's awesome. So, it's choosing what your worthy struggle is because, look, if you don't seek out a worthy struggle, struggle is going to find you anyway. So, it's really important to seek out that worthy struggle because you're going to suffer one way or the other in life and choose a suffering that's worthy of who you are and who you want to be. And you get to decide on what realm you want to play. For example, I still get, spiders still creep me out. I could put myself in a pit of spiders and feel exposure therapy. I don't care to because-

Dave:

It's not worth it.

Akshay Nanavati:

I'm doing other things and it's just ultimately we all have 24 hours in a day. So, you got to decide where you want to invest that, but I do think there's value in engaging it to some degree but you decide what that looks like, find your own flavor of it.

Dave:

So, you want to be in a pit of super models?

Akshay Nanavati:

Yeah, far more appealing than a pit of spiders.

Dave:

I'm with you brother.

Akshay Nanavati:

Which is scarier though, who knows?

Dave:

You have three takeaways in Fearvana, the big ones there. Can you walk me through what they are? So, all of our Upgrade Collective listeners and not just listeners in general can walk away from this. All right, what do I need to know? And maybe you guys want to read Fearvana, maybe you don't, but let's get you the main points there.

Akshay Nanavati:

Sure. Yeah. So, number one is that fear is not the antithesis of Nirvana, fear is the access point to it. So, how do we make this actionable? Fundamentally is to stop demonizing fear, and any emotion. You'll often hear, I mean, the biggest self-help guys in the world will say, "How to overcome anxiety, be fearless, don't be scared." Let go of all that. When any emotion shows up, accept it for its isness, let go of the judgment. Once you accept it and let go of the judgment around it, then you start, can you do something about it? And when you engage fear, I always like to say that fear propels you to prepare.

Akshay Nanavati:

So, as an example, I was terrified of writing a book on fear ironically, right? But I was terrified. You've written books, it's scary. You're putting yourself out there. What if people hate you? What if people think you're stupid? What if you get that dreaded one-star review on Amazon? all that kind of stuff. So, I was scared, but because I was scared I wrote down, and literally do this exercise, write this down. What am I scared of? Why am I scared? What's the worst case scenario? What can I do to prepare for the worst case scenario? So, because I was scared of writing a bad book, I studied from authors like Jack Canfield, the Chicken Soup for the Soul author, and I studied how do you write a better book? Because I did that, I mean, I must have trashed 100,000 words worth of work. But I ended up writing a book that was worthy of being endorsed by the Dalai Lama, and one I'm truly proud of now that I know it's making an impact.

Akshay Nanavati:

So, engage the fear, use it, stop demonizing it, and then use it as fuel to drive you forward. And also other ways to practically apply that is what's the why on the other side? Why do you want to do that? What's the thing that scares you? What's the why behind it? knowing the reward on the other side of it. Also, engaging the flip side of fear, like fear of consequences. Like for me, I literally sat down and visualized myself dying. What if I die never having shared my message with the world? And that was scarier to me than the fear of writing a book. So, you weigh those fears, and this one's much scarier. I'm going to write my book. So, engaging the fear in that way.

Dave:

Wow. That's powerful, man. So, yeah, you're afraid of this, you're afraid of that, which one's worse? Man, if only we could have politicians do that.

Akshay Nanavati:

Right?

Dave:

What am I more afraid of? Millions of people with pitchforks or not getting paid by a large company. Sorry, I didn't say that out loud. I apologize if that was inappropriate.

Akshay Nanavati:

Love it.

Dave:

To be very clear, I'm opposed to pitchforks in any form. I just see that that's the direction things may be heading, and I would like it to not go there.

Akshay Nanavati:

I can relate.

Dave:

But I'm not afraid of it. To be perfectly honest, it's either going to happen or it's not going to happen, right?

Akshay Nanavati:

Yeah. And that's why I like engaging the flip side of those fears, and the fear of death, I think is the most powerful one. Anytime you're engaging a fear of access death, and you can... What I mean by accessing death, on the one hand, you can literally confront, or you could actually die, things that I do. But on the other hand, you can do death meditations. I do monthly death meditations. In Buddhism, they practice meditating on death, and that brings you closer to death. And then when you do that, it will bring you into a heightened awareness to life. And so, the fear of death is a constant fear that drives me into living a more fulfilling life. So, that's the way to weigh those fears. So, that's takeaway number one with some practical applications is fear is not the antithesis of Nirvana, but the access point to it.

Akshay Nanavati:

The second one is the dis-identification. That there's no self to find, there's only a self to create. So, this is what we touched on is allowing yourself to separate from what is, and the way to start doing that is it's a simple practice of awareness. As you're standing in the line for the store somewhere, what am I feeling right now? What am I thinking right now? So, simply by becoming aware of what it is, you can start recognizing that these things are there, but you are not those things.

Akshay Nanavati:

For example, last weekend I did a two-hour meditation. Sitting cross legged for two hours, your legs start to hurt. And I would literally say to myself, and my mind, "I'm not my body." And by acknowledging that I'm not my body, the pain would disappear. If only for a moment, it would return. But inevitably, the cycle would continue. So, start recognizing the... Start separating yourself from not only yourself, but from everything around you. Meaning that everything we see is a construct. All of life is not... We don't engage with life as it is. We engage with our lens of life.

Akshay Nanavati:

Simplistically, if you're wearing red glasses, the whole world looks red. We all have, and these constructs are our beliefs, our mental models, and everything. Like as an example, when I look at that door, and I see it's gray, what makes that door gray because I've been taught from a young age that color is gray. But there's something, there's something between the pure isness of what that is, and my construct that have attached to it. It's hard to... You can't really quantify that.

Akshay Nanavati:

You can't describe it because by talking about it, by applying words to it, you're conceptualizing a thought, and therefore inevitably applying a construct to it. But when you practice accepting the

constructs of things, whether they be external and internal, you can start seeing them as a construct, acknowledge that reality isn't inherently real, and then when you see that reality is inherently real, you can ultimately create your own reality. So, that's, I would say, the core of it is acknowledging the inherent constructs of reality, so you can create your own one.

Akshay Nanavati:

And then which leads me to the third takeaway is this kind of thing, again, that I was touching on a singular dualism, that the idea that contrast is what gives life its flavor. Contrast gives life its flavor. You cannot have summits without valleys. You cannot have highs without lows. You cannot have light without darkness. So, play on those edges. The biggest flaw, I believe in mental health is the idea that mental wellbeing is this state without tension. It's the state with harmony, it's a state of equilibrium.

Dave:

It's like you can't have good without pharmaceutical companies.

Akshay Nanavati:

Nice. Exactly. You need the-

Dave:

I'm just trying to make sure I understand you point.

Akshay Nanavati:

Well put, better than I could put it. Exactly. But the way for an individual to apply that is to go play on those edges. Create what I call deliberate disequilibrium. Go play, and if you're comfortable with pleasure, seek out pain. War is an example of this. The most profound example of this is, and Viktor Frankl's book *Man's Search for Meaning* he talks about how there were people in a concentration camp who would... And these they're starving, tortured, cold, experiencing the horrors, the darkness of humanity that no human should ever experience, and they would walk around giving away their last piece of bread to somebody else.

Akshay Nanavati:

I mean, the courage in that, the humanity in that is unfathomable. And why I bring that up is to say that this experience of absolute darkness and evil paradoxically reveals the absolute light and good. And so, when you experience, and hence the singular dualism, when you play on those edges, you start to experience the true flavor that is this life. You experience life, the adventure that it is for all it's worth, and if we look at, ultimately, what are we seeking?

Akshay Nanavati:

We're seeking, I call it neurological bliss. So, this is the neuro chemicals of bliss and spiritual bliss. This is fulfillment, happiness, inner peace, whatever word you want to use to call that. If you look at how we feel that, you got to experience the edge of life. You've got to know the summits and the valleys and you can find beauty in all of it. To recognize that happiness is not the elimination of sadness, happiness is the ability to find the gift in sadness. So, you will find sadness, but that's okay, that's part of it.

Akshay Nanavati:

And so at the core of that, when we bring it all back is to, you have to, and coming back to lesson number one about fear not being the antithesis of Nirvana is to accept that suffering is not the enemy. Such fear of stress, anxiety, pain, suffering, diversity. Often when I do speeches, I'll show these words. And wherever I do this in the world, you can ask people, "Do you think of this as positive or negative?" Nobody hears these words and thinks of them as positive, that's the core of it. The demonization of suffering is the foundational problem when you can start falling in love with these words, these emotions, these experiences. Like when I hear suffering, one of my core mantras, you're wearing a shirt that says it is, suffer well, suffer well. The paradoxical nature of that. Falling in love with that from there becomes the foundation where you can do all these other things.

Akshay Nanavati:

So, to summarize, because I know went long there. But fear, embracing fear, embracing suffering. Dis-identification of the self so you can create whoever you want to be, and embracing contrast, embracing the polarities of life, so you can experience the adventure that it really is.

Dave:

Those are some powerful takeaways from just a single book. It's very challenging to write personal development content because it's easy to fill a book with mush. Really, you can say a lot of just stuff that sounds good, and vaguely feels good. But when you try to get down to it, you peel it away, there's not much left. You didn't do that in your book, which is I think why you earned the Dalai Lama's-

Akshay Nanavati:

Thank you.

Dave:

... foreword, because I promise you he did not do that [crosstalk 00:57:00].

Akshay Nanavati:

I would imagine so. Thank you.

Dave:

So, nice job on just putting words to stuff that's mostly the world of ineffable, the feelings that we don't have words for them. That's what ineffable means. It means that there are no words for it. You're saying, "Well, I'm going to draw the space around what I'm trying to describe so that you can see it," which is tough to do.

Akshay Nanavati:

It was very. Yeah, writing that book was one of the... I used to procrastinate by going running a marathon. I'm like, "I'm just going to run." That's a comfort zone I'm... That's a suffering I'm comfortable with. But it was totally worth the struggle of writing it because hopefully it leaves a mark.

Dave:

I think you have left a mark with it. And I got to ask you something now, and you might not like this one. Do you want to go on a date? [crosstalk 00:57:49]. Here's what I want to ask you. You have a trip coming up here, November 10th. You're going to ski 30, 40 days on the Ross Ice Shelf, and you're going to walk

on a spot of land 49 other human beings have set on. Aren't you done with that? Haven't you faced your fear? Why are you still doing this?

Akshay Nanavati:

Great question. I don't think you could ever be done with these things. So, why specifically Antarctica and polar exploration, and stepping into this particular realm is in my experience, there is nothing that offers greater suffering than polar exploration. It is an experience of monotony, of tediousness, of grind. Let's say unlike mountaineering, for example, when I was just in Denali climbing in Alaska. For mountaineering, every day you're seeing different terrain as you move up the mountain. In Antarctica as it was in Greenland, there's a complete nothingness, and every day is that you wake up and there's this pure white emptiness.

Dave:

You're doing meditation, like a visual meditation, visual fasting.

Akshay Nanavati:

Exactly. So, if you experience stillness, then you add on that the eight to 12 hours of skiing a day. So, the grind of the physical grind. You add the environmental suffering of pure cold. I just read an article yesterday about Antarctica has experienced the coldest it's ever been. I'm like, "Fantastic, great timing, thank you for that." So, you got the brutality of the environment, which when you go into environments that are so brutal, they demand more out of you because-

Dave:

Absolutely.

Akshay Nanavati:

... the environment forces you to become better than yourself in order to thrive in that environment. And so, I love to continue to explore these places. On the one hand, you get to see the Earth in a way that few human beings ever have, and the profundity of connecting to Earth in that way is amazing. And so, why at the core of it is what I was touching on earlier is connection. Connection to myself, connection to Earth, the stillness of that, the meditative experience of that by being in an environment that is so hostile, so unforgiving to man, so brutal, inhospitable it, you have to transcend what is to become something more to survive. And that experience of transcendence is what I seek.

Akshay Nanavati:

Every new experience of transcendence opens up new doors. And so, every time inevitably you push harder and harder. This will be the biggest toughest expedition I've ever done. So, I've done some stuff, but this will be the toughest because right after that one I'm then climbing Mount Vinson, the tallest mountain in Antarctica. I'm doing both these expeditions back to back. So, the daunting nature of that is terrifying. I mean, I'm constantly feeling fear around it, but I'm going there because I want to open new doors. I want to access new avenues of transcendence and see where that takes me in order to not just for myself, but bring the wisdom back to my human family.

Akshay Nanavati:

Actually, the words I want on my tombstone are based on Carl Jung's quotes and it says, "He wandered the world with human heart to doctor the sick with human soul." That's pulled from a Carl Jung quote and that's why I wander the world with human heart to gain a wisdom and insight. I mean, to your point earlier about why I was able to describe Fearvana the way I was, was because I have lived it, and I don't say this again with ego. I mean, one on the research is great, it's valuable, but nothing, there's knowledge comes from learning, wisdom comes from experience. And both have their place, but when the experience of it, it allows me to go places that I cannot ever go by studying it. I love that for my own experience on a selfish level, but as well as on a selfless level the ability to serve has been transformed by experiencing transcendence at that level. And so, that's why I keep seeking it.

Dave:

I'm translating that to you're doing a blinded walking meditation with Wim Hof style ice exposure.

Akshay Nanavati:

I love it. Put it way better than I ever could.

Dave:

There you go. That's important. It's not just about the risk there.

Akshay Nanavati:

Absolutely not.

Dave:

It's about you're specifically creating neurological stuff, and there's also energetic places on the planet, and that is one of them for sure, which is probably part of that.

Akshay Nanavati:

Yeah.

Dave:

It also makes me think about it. Many of my favorite places on earth are above 18,000 feet elevation, and there's no trees there, and they are Stark, and people say, "Well, how can you like that? There's no trees. There's no life there." I'm like, "That's not how I see it." So, I'm with you there. There's something special about that kind of a thing. Now I get it. Before I'm thinking, "This is a guy who's an adrenaline junkie who's put a good Band-Aid on it," but I don't think that's how you roll.

Akshay Nanavati:

Polar exploration is not as dangerous as downhill skiing, all those steep things that we were talking about with flow. I mean, it's risky, of course, you can die. People have died in polar environments, but it's not nearly as dangerous as Alex Honnold's free soloing. It's more an exercise in suffering than it is in danger. So to me the appeal is that stillness of that. That is the meditative experience of that is it's of course obviously challenging. Last weekend I did eight hours of tire dragging and I was training for it. It is mind numbingly painful, but where it takes you by going there.

Akshay Nanavati:

Again, you get to transcend reality. You get to transcend the construct of even time, and you get to experience time in a different way, and time is ultimately our most precious asset. That is everything. So, you get to experience it in a different way. And that's the draw for me about polar exploration because after South Pole, I'm then going to the Arctic and skiing to the North Pole, and the Arctic Ocean is another magnificent world I've seen only pictures that is awe inspiring to experience Earth in that way and to stand on top of the world, the bottom of the world. It's fascinating. I think you, whatever, we all have our own version of what God means, call it God, universe, whatever it means. But I think for me, I get to touch the hand of God in these places.

Dave:

Very, very well put, and I do know what you're saying, and that's something that if you're listening to the show, and you've never had the experience of being somewhere that remote, that rugged, that far from humanity. Right before the pandemic hit, I had scheduled a trip to go to the very remote parts of Mongolia where no humans live to go horseback riding on a Mongolian horse with a few other people just for two weeks on the middle nowhere well because there's something magic about that. And then, well, we shut everything down because of... Good timing on Fearvana, on your book there because I would have showed up. Now, I know that you have fearvana.com, and all that stuff. But before we close the show, I think some of the people from the Upgrade Collective here would love to ask you some questions.

Akshay Nanavati:

Sure. I'd love that.

Dave:

All right. Guys, raise your hand if you'd like to ask a question. I see Joanne and [Gem 01:04:48] are thinking about it. Lauren's bored. Paul is all excited. Lucas is in a red light room. He's pretty much... It's too late for him and Ski is just thinking about butter. Sorry, guys. Jen has questions. I can see those questions, and they're all over your face. Come on, Jen, come on up ask a question. No. Betsy, you're working on a book on neuroscience and fear and stuff. You've got a question. I didn't know what it is.

Betsy:

Yeah, mine's all about having a scaredy cat brain. It's a different look at fear than this discussion. I admire the discussion and the thinking. But I've been run by a scaredy cat brain for a long time, and my work on neuroscience has really helped free myself from that. So, I'm into that.

Dave:

Is there a difference? I'm asking this on behalf of Betsy who I know wants to ask the question, but is too afraid of it because of her scaredy cat brain. Is there a difference in fear between men and women?

Akshay Nanavati:

I don't think so. I mean, our brain operates the same way. And this is why, coming back to separating the content of the fear itself and accepting fear. Fear of death, fear of rejection. I mean, one time a few months ago when I was in Jersey I was sitting in my house in Jersey. I live in a nice place, safe neighborhood, and suddenly start filling this tremendous fear. And I do the most insane things and yet here I am in a very normal setting feeling fear. So, this comes back to who cares how fear shows up? Accept it and then move through it.

Akshay Nanavati:

And to the point about a scaredy cat brain, so was I. I think I mentioned I was scared of roller coasters. I was scared of Ferris wheels. I was terrified of everything. I remember when I was a kid, I went to the Great Barrier Reef with my parents, and we were snorkeling, and we got to a point where the ridge just fell off into the empty black nothingness of the ocean, and I was too scared and I turned around. Now, I've been K diving.

Akshay Nanavati:

So, you work your way up the ladder of risk one step at a time at a level you choose at the worthy struggle you're pursuing in what I call that zone of Fearvana. Too far, and it will paralyze you. Just the right amount, and it'll push you, and then inevitably that zone keeps expanding. But I wasn't someone who was born this way to do the kind of things that I do. I've expanded my zone of Fearvana very systematically to grow. But I think fear just is fear and letting go of the judgments, the assignments, the content of the thing that creates fear, who cares? Let it be there. Let it do what it does. I literally talk out loud to myself, to my brain, as if it's a separate entity from myself. If there were cameras following me, I'd look like a crazy person.

Dave:

Good for you. That works.

Akshay Nanavati:

It works tremendously.

Dave:

You are not your brain.

Akshay Nanavati:

Exactly. You do your thing. I'm going to do something different.

Betsy:

I respectfully disagree a bit, but-

Akshay Nanavati:

Totally cool.

Dave:

That's why you're writing a book, Betsy. When you're done we'll talk about on this show. See all the fun we have in Upgrade Collective. So, that's cool. And Lauren, you have something to ask.

Lauren:

Yes, yes. Thank you. I loved everything you said, and I have similar personalities to you. Always been a thrill seeker, riding intense life. I touched on this in the chat. But part of the challenges of facing these obstacles, but being in control. And so, have you ever been in a situation where you actually had no

control, or you couldn't reclaim your control? And how did you deal with that? And how does that affect your perception of fear as a weapon or as a benefit when you really couldn't control it?

Akshay Nanavati:

Love it. Great question. That's why I love going in these environments. When you go into mountains and all that you have no control over what nature does to you. In war, you have no control. But there's this paradoxical thing that happens. When you are in environments where you have no control, it forces you to exercise the muscle of control. Like in this world, I can drive down the road assuming that the person is going to stay in their lane and not swerve. You're not thinking about exercising control over your reality because it's assumed in the order of it. In nature, so for example, when I skied across Greenland, I did this one month, 190-pound Dragon, 190-pound slide for 350 miles across Greenland.

Akshay Nanavati:

For five days, we were stuck in brutal storms. Storms so horrific that the following year a British explorer was killed in those storms. You have no control when that happens. This is nature bombarding you with its most hostile, and you have no control over that. But you have to exercise the muscle of control. And by doing that, we set up our tent the right way. Six of us grabbing our tent, setting it up the right way. You're now setting it up in a way that is forcing you to exercise control over the environment, so the tent will stay stable so you can survive. So, it makes you think about applying control into an environment that you have no control. And as a result, you actually strangely feel more control in those environments.

Akshay Nanavati:

Same thing like war, you can't control where bullets fly. But because of how little you can control in that environment, you have to keep thinking about what you can control and bring that into the forefront of your consciousness. That allows you to bring control where there isn't one, and that's why it in a way is part of the appeal about going to these places. It makes you feel more in control of your world than you do otherwise.

Lauren:

Thank you.

Dave:

Lauren, thanks for the question, and thank you for the great answer there. Any final words for people listening to the human upgrade around upgrading people, fear, anything else that you feel like we didn't talk about in the show because you've got a lot of wisdom here, my man.

Akshay Nanavati:

Thank you. I think if I had to summarize the one upgrade in a line, it would be falling in love with the experience of suffering however it shows up, fear, stress, anxiety, and using that to find, live, and love your worthy struggle. So, what is your worthy struggle? Find it, live it, love it. It starts by really... You can listen to a podcast, read a book, but nothing is going to give you the wisdom you will gain when you have to play in the arena. So, self-belief is ultimately built on the battlefield of life. So, whatever your respective battlefield, go out there, play, push yourself. And it's inherently hard, you will suffer, it will be painful, but don't seek the end of that.

Akshay Nanavati:

We often think that when I get there, wherever there is the problems go away. I get a million dollars, a car, whatever it may be. Recognizing that progress is not the elimination of problems. Progress is the creation of new problems. So, accept that no matter where you are in life, there will be new problems, there will be new pain. Embrace it, fall in love with it, and keep chasing it, and you will keep chasing your fears. So, as I always like to say, I sign off my speeches this way is never stop chasing fear or you will spend your whole life running from it.

Dave:

Beautifully put. Thank you. Your book is called Fearvana. Guys, got to fearvana.com and read it. And it's not every day that the Dalai Lama endorses a book. So, I consider that to be a sign that the book is probably worth your time. Thanks again, my friend.

Akshay Nanavati:

Thank you so much, appreciate you.

Dave:

If you like today's episode, do what Akshay says. He says that you need to embrace that fear. I've had more than 1,000 entrepreneurs come through 40 Years of Zen, and I tell them on the first day, this is a five-day intense neurofeedback program. On one of the days, usually the first three days, you're going to decide all of a sudden that I'm the biggest jerk in the world. That it's too hot, it's too cold, and everything in life sucks, and that's suffering. As soon as that happens, you can be really, really happy because it means that you're about to have a massive breakthrough. And until you turn inward enough to find all the parts you don't want to find because they're scary, then you're stuck. And once you find those, that's where the people who have the biggest progress in a few days have it. So, I've seen this over and over. It's just so hard to put words to it. This episode I'm hoping for you puts words to that idea. If it's really uncomfortable, do it more. On that note, I will see you all for the next episode.