

The Breath Of Life

Buried under an avalanche, an avid backcountry skier finds that the one thing he can do is all that stands between him and oblivion.

by Evan Weselake

There were 21 of us skiers zigzagging up British Columbia's Mt. Traviata on that day last January. About a hundred feet from the mountaintop, the snow cracked open right in front of me. I thought it would just slough off across our track. Instead, the crack grew, and the world began to slide past my field of vision. In fact, it was the snow, carrying me and 12 others down the mountain.

"Avalanche!" I cried, louder than I will ever be able to yell again. Seconds later, the ride had ended and I was buried amidst tons of snow. I couldn't move but I could see some light, and I could breathe. A silence like none I'd ever heard enveloped me.

I was panting like a dog; the snow bound my chest and back so tightly that I couldn't take a deep breath. Random thoughts flashed through my mind, including the worry that I was being crushed. So I fought against the snow with my shoulders—and quickly lost all breath. Lack of air forced me to stop moving.

I'm an endurance cyclist, and I've always been amazed at the countless little wells of strength I can find within myself while cycling. Just when I feel I can't go on, I close my eyes, look deep within, and discover other reservoirs of strength and calm. When I find the calm, I can identify the energy I am wasting and rechannel it.

Lying encased in the snow, I started to look for that little bit of wasted energy. I was tensed up, flexing everything. My left leg was painfully contorted into an impossible position, and my body was fighting to straighten it. But the snow would not allow that, so I let go. At that, first my foot, then my leg, and finally my hip began to relax. As those big muscles in my hip and leg eased, so did my breathing, just a little. I let go of my shoulders, arms, and back.

My breathing slowed as my demand for air eased up. I remember letting my eyesight go fuzzy, as in a child's game. Since there was nothing in the snow to look at, this was easy. With that release, my attention shifted to...nothing. The tension in my body kept dissipating, and my breathing slowed further. Unlike in bike racing or yoga, I wasn't rechanneling the energy to any specific place. I just didn't want to waste it.

In my life as an athlete, I have discovered it's possible to train my body, mind, and emotions—to develop physical, mental, and emotional strength and endurance. But just as important, I've found, is being able to summon physical, mental, and emotional calmness. Buried in the snow, I found that as my physical body relaxed, so did my mind. Instead of random flashes of fear and hope, I started to think calmly and rationally. "Breathe," I told myself. "Your only job is to breathe. It's not dark; that means you'll continue to have air. You can lie here for days—all you have to do is breathe." That thought became my mantra; if I wanted to survive, I would have to let go. It would seem like an eternity before I was dug free.

Hours later, sitting in the lodge, I wrestled with a torrent of emotions about the avalanche, which had claimed the lives of seven people, including one of my dearest friends. Again I thought, "All you have to do is breathe." It wasn't until the next day, after the tumult of the ordeal had begun to subside, that I was finally able to rest. It was then that I realized that from the start of the slide until the moment I had drifted into sleep, the greatest calm I had felt was while I was trapped in the snow.

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