

UNDER THE



ICE



Wim Hof is on a mission to make us all feel better. Through a mix of meditative breathing and cold exposure, the Iceman has attempted Everest in his shorts and regularly submerges himself in ice for hours. He believes we can all harness the power within and adventure further than we ever dreamed of.

WORDS: ANNA SMITH



Photo: Jeroen Nieuwhuis



Photo: Jeroen Nieuwhuis

I've never felt particularly vulnerable to cults. I'm rarely swept up by fads. I've even dodged an MLM or two when some impressionable classmates of mine found the cure to all of life's ailments on Instagram. But looking through my screen into the bright eyes of the Iceman, Wim Hof, I got it. I was ready to give my life over to cold showers and hyperventilation, ready to walk up a mountain in my underwear, ready to unlock capabilities I never knew I had.

This isn't a new phenomenon. Read any write up of a conversation with Wim Hof, the 64-year-old Dutchman hailed with the creation of a breathing and cold-exposure technique that enhances endurance and calms the mind, and you'll see the same thing over and over again. The most experienced of journalists being swept up by his charisma, whether they love him or hate him for it. Clearly, this is an incredibly talented orator; totally captivating in his charm and possessing a zest for life that you can't help but aspire to.

My own interaction with Wim, a 45-minute chat over video-call that I had intended to be about his exploits up the world's great mountains and across its dramatic ice deserts, turned into what can only be described as a motivational speech. He made the claim during the conversation that there are 100 million people who had given themselves over to the Wim Hof way of life. Well Mr. Hof, count me in. One hundred million and one.

A Stimulation Replacement

Wim holds a disputed number of world records. He claims it is 26, but depending on which source you're choosing to trust, the number may be closer to one. Although it's quite the disparity, this type of rhetoric usually dominates the conversation about the Iceman. Records aside, Wim has swum for 66 metres underneath an ice sheet, ran a half marathon in only shorts (no shoes) above the arctic circle, completed marathons in the desert and made it most of the way up both Everest and Kilimanjaro in his underwear. He puts these feats down to his breathing technique and cold exposure.

"At a certain moment I became so good that I started to do all kinds of records. Guinness World Records, like swimming under the ice, or climbing mountains, or running marathons – both in the desert and beyond the polar circle. That is because my body got so used to being in control, by exposing it to nature and being deeply stimulated. That made me get a much deeper sense of control over myself and I was able to challenge what was thought possible. I was testing it out, I was challenging it, and then Discovery Channel, National Geographic, all kinds of TV came to do world records and challenges with me. But then I came into contact with science and I could show what was scientifically impossible and challenge that paradigm. And that's what I did on numerous occasions, proving that a human physiology is capable of so much more than we thought possible. But that is the modern day 'comfort zone behaviour' for you. It's

Above

Wim's home is adapted for him to practice his method including an industrial sized freezer

Left

He hosts retreats in Poland and Spain to educate others in the Wim Hof Method



Photo: Jeroen Nieuwhuis

**Left Above**

Wim began experimenting in the cold at age 17

Left Below

He has set many records for longest time submerged in ice

Above

He is also an accomplished yogi

brought a lesser control of our mind and our body.”

It isn't ground-breaking for Wim to rally against the modern turn to the indoors, especially for children, but I was interested by this link between his extraordinary capabilities, his method, and the outdoors. Many pictures of Wim practicing his method show him in a barrel full of ice water or an industrial sized fridge wallpapered with a picture of him meditating on the ice. Though probably a much more transportive experience, the outdoors doesn't seem essential for his technique to work. So I dug a little further.

“We were very adventurous, very outdoorsy [as children]. I was always Tarzan playing out in the forest. We made cabins in the trees or digging them under the ground. It was like animals. We are mammals! Sometimes we liked to be under the ground, sometimes in a tree, sometimes running through the forest. We had no iPhones back then, no computers. You had the outdoors. Now that has disappeared. Why? Because we are into iPhones and gaming. Monitors in general. What they offer is immense, it's like 1000 channels. Back then we only had black and white TV and maybe one channel or at the most two, so it was a completely different experience. I think we deprive ourselves of the right stimulation as we have mammalian bodies and our senses are developed to process stimulation like heat, pressure, velocity, all those things. They make our bodies work, connected through the nervous system which is connected to the brain. The brain is the head of the nervous system but because we do not stimulate it as much anymore, we've lost a deeper control over the system.”

Much of Wim's technique is about stimulating the nervous system in a way that he has traced back to ancient, natural abilities that we are losing in the modern world. He's worked with numerous scientists, most notably from Radboud University in the Netherlands, who have published both favourable and sceptical statements on his technique. As with any highly publicised scientific method sprung from the mouth of an eccentric character there are many who think it's all quack, with an equal number who see the sense through the rolled 'r's and piercing eyes.

“When you go out in nature is when you go in [to yourself]. Just do it once, it will be breath-taking. It will show you that the cold is actually your warm friend. It makes your cardiovascular system work to the level of the capillaries. When we do not stimulate the deep lying capillaries, because our bodies are always luke-warm, there is no challenge. All these millions of little muscles called the endothelium are not at work. They don't need to work because there's nothing to adapt to. So they get weaker. That is the cardiovascular problem in our modern-day society. So when we do the cold exposure we learn to activate the capillaries, the endothelium, and the blood flow is able to get into the cells much better.”



Photo: Jeroen Nieuwhuis

He goes on to explain that with better blood flow, the oxygen can be involved in the creation of energy within the cells, “aerobic dissimulation”.

“That’s why we feel so energised when we take a cold shower.”

High on Your Own Supply

Whether the science makes much sense to you or not, it is undeniable that Wim’s technique makes people feel good. His breathing techniques are similar to a form of Tibetan Buddhist meditation known as Tummo. Tummo dates back to the 8th century, has plenty of evidence to back up its efficacy and helps to calm the mind, body and soul. Combined with cold exposure, even if you aren’t seeing long term results, you’ll at least get a good physiological wake-up call.

What is also undeniable is that Wim himself possesses capabilities beyond those of the average human. He is able to endure great amounts of pain and temperatures in both extremes and live to tell the tale.

“The first time I ran a half marathon, barefoot, beyond the polar circle, my will was there, I could override my body, but my left forefoot endured a self-inflicted cold injury.

The thing is, I am stronger than my pain, I can override it. It’s logical, because when you go into the cold you have to override your pain and the body adapts. I’ve learned to do that well. So well that at 18 kilometres I had a numb feeling up to my knee on the left leg and it felt like a piece of wood. That means that the blood flow has stopped and can lead to irreparable cell damage - that is frostbite.

The dermatologist, in front of the TV cameras, said ‘look at this and this and this, this is dead, it is irreparable and we will have to cut it away later’, they gave me a lot of medicines and all kinds of things. I never used it, I healed myself. Months later, I was on Mount Everest in shorts to do another expedition. Things like that I’ve seen too many times. We have ignored and neglected our own healing powers, our own confidence in our healing powers, our own connection with the power given to us by nature. It’s simply innate. We are capable do so much more than we do.”

Beyond the science, the tests, and the need for any changemaker to convince the public on empirical grounds of their credibility, there is no denying the spiritual aspect of the Wim Hof Method. If you were to join one of Wim’s retreats in Poland or Spain, the atmosphere, group bonding, charisma and soul searching is likely to yield results in and of themselves. And although the team at the Wim Hof Method are adamant that you can achieve the same results with any trained instructor, I have no doubt that having Wim guide you through the method is all the encouragement you’d need to reap its rewards.

“In the end it is also spiritual. Namely, when you start to understand more than what we think we are, but who we are consciously. That’s where you learn to have control over thinking processes. Right now, most people ruminate so much in their minds, like a hamster. But, hey man, you are a human, you are the one who knows how to bring peace within, who can see and feel your destiny, your purpose, who has control. We are energetic beings. When it comes from the depth and it comes from this mysterious place called

Right

Some studies have shown that Wim has a stronger immune response than average in response to a pathogen

Above

He starts every morning with a cold swim in the lake on his property



Photo: Jeroen Nieuwhuis

"WHAT DEEP MOTIVATION
DOES IS BREAK OPEN THE
CONDITIONED MIND AND BODY"





the soul, then we feel who we are, what we are, and we radiate with a power that is stronger than our thoughts. That is love.

That starts when you look out over mountains and you see love, you see so immensely you can't grasp it with your mind. It is miraculous. That is when the soul suddenly appears and that's why we go to these beautiful landscapes and because you can't grasp it you've got to do it. It is being done far too little."

Incredibly Amazing

"So with your techniques, could everyone potentially climb Everest?" I asked, maybe a little too hopefully.

"Everybody is able to do so much more than they think right now. I'm a normal, simple guy yet because I stimulated myself so deeply, I got a hold of that physiology and was suddenly able to do what was considered to be impossible. That is nothing extraordinary."

How much of a normal, simple guy Wim is can be hard to pin down. There are many accounts of his life that range from being a yoga instructor in Amsterdam's Vondelpark to studying with martial arts and meditation experts on the banks of the Ganges. Regardless, we do know that he faced incredible tragedy when his wife took her own life after a battle with her mental health. It seems that this event has spurred Hof, whether an international yoga master or humble teacher, to help everyone feel more in control of their bodies and minds. But I interject...

"What is extraordinary is that life force is absolutely there for everybody to experience. I had my last climb of Kilimanjaro in shorts and my oldest participant was 76 years old. He had no formal experience in mountaineering and he was suffering from Lyme disease. He did it. So motivated as he was, he did it in 31 hours in his shorts. What deep, deep motivation does is break open the conditioned mind and body and suddenly, through the right breathing, you are able to do so much more. And anybody can do that. My oldest participant is 101 years old. Her sister is 99 years old and they are doing the cold, they are doing the breathing exercises and they love it... It's good and great for every human because every human should be able to feel great. That's the way we are built to feel - great. Not mediocre, not by chance sometimes good or not.

What is special about that [the Wim Hof Method] is that everybody is able to do it. And the more people see it, feel it, are doing it, the better I feel, because that's my mission. I want to bring back the awareness that you are able to feel incredibly amazing. Unbelievable. Good. That's who you are and what you are. And anybody can do it."

It was clear Wim wasn't concerned about any of us coming for his records, but for someone pushing the limit of human endurance, one has to wonder where the limit is. How much of our inner selves can we truly harness?

"The limit is no longer. Become limitless.

I'm doing studies with the best neurologists and neuroscientists in the world to show that we are able to activate 100% of our own brain. It is time that we learn consciously to get into 100% of our brain. With that, it holds the capacity to go beyond our thinking and consciously go within the mystery of the soul itself.

That makes us able to transcend, that will be the future. I am asked, 'Wim, what do I have to do on a daily basis?' I say, keep to this mantra: 'Just be happy, strong and healthy. The rest is bullshit!'

In Comparison with a Turtle

Wim hasn't taken on many great explorations recently, focusing more on education, science and getting the word out about his technique. In recent years he has had shows on the BBC and Vice, as well as profiles in Rolling Stone, The Guardian and many other national and international outlets. The Wim Hof Method is certainly spreading, one journalist at a time.

But what's next for the man himself?

"It's more the science now. We just recently finished a new study with 540 people, all wearing biometric watches, and they show to have incredible results. My mission is to make everybody much more happy, strong and healthy. Those are the mountains of ignorance I want to win over, I want to summit them. I want to bring the sunshine back inside people, to bring back the light. And for the rest, I train every day. I'm very strong. It's not about physical strength, though it is good to do physical activity and I do that every day. I challenge myself until I feel the pain threshold and even go a little bit beyond it because I feel that I'm then able to nullify the pain. That is powerful."

He is also taking time to write two books and to paint. He showed me a vibrant sunset painting of an African elephant beneath a tree. This painting was also the repeating pattern of his shirt, a gift from his wife. You can also expect an album from the Dutchman in the coming years; "music with a message." Despite all that, even for the Iceman, there is always more to learn.

"In the morning I'm in the lake [which is part of his property]. I'm doing my adventure outside in the dark, in the cold of the lake, swimming with the ducks and the fish. They touch me. They don't know what I am but it's like electricity.

I've got turtles in my pond. They are quite big. They call me the Iceman because of my exploits in the cold but these turtles are able to go six months under the ice and then appear back in springtime. I'm pathetic compared to them," he chuckled. "Yet we all have our powers. There. The message is get acquainted with the depth of your own power, because it's much more than what you think." **W**