

Where is the line between passion and addiction or abuse?

As I reflected on these questions, a friend noticed my mangled toes and asked what had happened that made me need this level of pain and physical abuse to feel comfortable in my skin. Her directness threw me backward as if I'd been hit by a baseball bat, but it also made me laugh with joy that someone had recognized so quickly what I'd hidden beneath the surface for so long. Some say passion simply explains everything. While I wanted to believe this, the time had come to figure out who I was beyond climbing.

Soon I discovered that the only place where I found peace and happiness was in nature, when I took the time to see beauty in the smallest things. I rediscovered yoga, and my body began to heal while I learned to appreciate the joy of simply being, sitting and observing. I started to realize that my desperate need to push and control myself came from a deep inner lack of love for myself as I was.

During a trip to Spain with Nico, after about six months without touching rock, the urge to climb returned. It felt like my feet had grown—none of my old climbing shoes fit anymore. I bought a pair of old Moccasims, several sizes too big, and we started on very easy routes. Touching rock again felt like reconnecting with a long-lost friend. After only a few easy routes I began wanting more. Yet, when I tried something harder, my body began to hurt again, and even when I completed a challenging climb, I didn't feel the same fulfillment I used to when clipping the chains. It became clear that I needed to change my relationship with climbing.

Over the last two years, through deepening my understanding of yoga and studying nature, I have slowly begun to learn to trust and nurture my love of myself. Gradually I have grown to see my inner beauty. I am starting to realize the strength that lies within me. In my sensitivity, vulnerability and femininity there is a strength much greater than that of flesh, muscle and tendons. I am learning to simply enjoy the feeling of this vertical dance—of flowing over the rock—and rejoice in my love of having air under my feet. In this way I am rediscovering my pure love for climbing every day, without being caught up in addiction or a desire for success. My old, accumulated injuries are slowly healing, and

it amazes me every day what our bodies are capable of when we give them time and love.

I know now that I do love moving my body on rock and being up high on a cliff face, and that the route does not need to be at my limit for me to find pleasure in it. Yet I also know that I do not need to climb to find happiness. My true passions come from within and are rooted in returning to my childhood ideal of living fully, without regrets and full of love for life itself.

—*Mayan Smith-Gobat,*  
*Frankenjura, Germany*

## Patience and Passion

SEPTEMBER 26, 2021: “I am safe!” Rohit Vartak's voice echoed from the side of Shoshala (ca. 4700m), a jagged spire of rock that towers above India's Baspa Valley in Himachal Pradesh. He sat on a granite sill with his legs dangling in the void, about 200 meters from the top. Around him, the rumpled sheet of black-green mountains armored with a snowy ridgeline flanked the other end of the valley. The clouds pressing into the range, level with his eyesight, appeared to be friendly enough and were far away. He rested his tired muscles for a few minutes and looked down at the miniature figures of Rakchham village (ca. 3100m). The sun on his face was a welcome sensation after so many gloomy days when storms had pushed the summit far out of reach. This day seemed different.

It was the sixteenth day since the climb began and he had reached the anchor of pitch sixteen. Suddenly there was a mild rumbling of something hitting his helmet and shoulders—clumps of mud. Puzzled, he opened his palms towards the sky. Snowflakes and grime settled on his skin, but he could hardly feel it because his tape gloves had been saturated with ice water and his hands were getting numb. He glanced at the sky. *It is our bad luck again*, he thought. The enchanting fairy clouds from the valley had transformed into deadly vultures racing at him. This day was no different after all!

“Bad weather, no summit even today. We have to go down fast!” Vartak yelled down to Bhupesh Patil.

Upon reuniting they glared at each other in dismay. They had another 550 meters to

rappel down to their base camp at the bottom of the route, where the other four members of their team waited in camp.

Weeks earlier they had been a team of seven, but their leader, Sachin Gaikwad, then 54, had to depart on September 1 after suffering from a debilitating case of altitude sickness. As a veteran of Himalayan expeditions with nearly four decades of climbing experience, Gaikwad had been instrumental in encouraging the group of younger men, who were in their twenties and early thirties, to attempt the second ascent of Trishul Direct (7b/5.12 A2, 750m). As the expedition continued, Gaikwad was at least able to offer guidance over regular video calls as the men huddled in wet tents day after day. Now sheltering from the rain once again, Vartak, Patil, Yogesh Umbre, Onkar Padval, Sameer Joshi and videographer Shivam Aher were so close and yet so far from completing an important benchmark for Indian big wall climbing.

“People here are not aware of the difference between mountaineering and rock climbing,” Gaikwad told me. “With this project our motive is to spread the awareness that the Himalaya are not only for treks or record-setting peaks but for pure rocks too. Although the climbing community has grown a lot in thirty years, we have a long way to go.”

IN 2012 A TALL Swiss man with curly hair stood in front of an audience that included the young and curious Vartak. With glittering eyes Vartak inquired about the man's most recent big wall success. It was Elie Chevieux, who had opened the Trishul Direct along with Yannick Boissenot and the late Giovanni Quirici in spring of 2011. This awe-inspiring encounter left a profound impact on Vartak, who knew then and there that he wanted to become like Elie, a big wall climber.

For seven years, Vartak and his teammates relentlessly prepared for their Himalayan ambition. Their journey began with the cobra's hood of Kokankada, a severely overhanging 600-meter big wall in the Western Ghats/Sahyadri Range. “Kokankada is risky with constant rockfall, always in sun with bee nests. It would require us to bivouac on the wall for days,” Vartak told me. After two failed attempts, the third time in 2017 felt like a mystical success. “We were ready for our dream project,” he said.

When India's Covid restrictions on

movements between states were temporarily lifted in January 2021, the climbers charted a plan for a recce trip to Shoshala in June to prepare for an attempt in September. They convinced their families, secured work leaves, collected piles of equipment and continued rigorous physical training while saving money and fundraising. Aher began practicing jumars and ropework to cope with frequent ups and downs while filming.

Everything was well-planned. But big walls never come easy. The second wave of the pandemic erupted in April, then devastating landslides in Kinnaur in July and August foiled their plans for a recon trip. Undeterred, the squad decided to arrive a week early to study the route. As their tolerance for setbacks grew, so did the delays.

Aher and Patil set off from Lonavala ten days ahead of the others, on August 19, in a van packed with 500 kilograms of equipment—everything the team needed for the trip. But the vehicle broke down just five hours into the 2000-kilometer journey. A minor engine problem that seemed repairable in an hour led to a delay of eight days when the tow truck got into an accident, damaging the van even more. The two men who left early would be the last to arrive.

On August 28, after an excursion by train and bus, the five van-less members reached Rakchham. They were so close and still so far from their goal, as they soon encountered more obstacles and delays.

Padval and Gaikwad started suffering from acute mountain sickness (AMS). Meanwhile, the group couldn't find porters and locals rejected their permission letter from the Indian Mountaineering Foundation. Just when they thought all was lost, Naresh Negi, the owner of Kailash View Camp, stepped in to help. He advocated for them in the village meeting and offered his employees as porters. It eased the team's stress, but unfortunately, the relief didn't last long.

Gaikwad ebbed back home on September 1. It was the third day since the onset of the AMS. Padval had recovered but Gaikwad's health worsened. He was sprawled on the bed wearing layers of clothes with thick blankets piled on top of him. A wet cloth covered his forehead. Joshi took the final reading: 180 beats per minute. The team bid adieu to their leader. They grieved, making sure not to express it out loud.

It was a brief ray of hope when their white van pulled into the village the next day. The team of six was now set to go, but first they had to find the approach to the start of the climb.

After ten years since the Swiss-French team's first ascent, the path to the foot of the pinnacle had to be rediscovered. They split into teams and used drones and photographs to scout the terrain for five days before they found the way.

On September 7 Vartak, Aher, and Umbre marched ahead with porters to set up base camp. But three days of unexpected heavy rain interrupted their itinerary before they could get settled. The porters abandoned the cause, and Joshi, Patil and Padval had to stay in the village waiting for the weather to clear.

"We were amazed at the series of problems we were facing," Patil said. "But none of us ever gave up. Our objective was to climb at least one pitch. We were not going back so easily."

They would start rock climbing at last on September 11 as the sun emerged from the haze. After a heavy breakfast and more counting and sorting of gear, they performed the goodwill ritual that many Indians follow before a significant venture: they lit incense, chanted a prayer, slammed a coconut on a rock and sprinkled the sweet water on the feet of Shoshala. All six of them ate the fresh coconut (as prasada) to infuse themselves with the power of Shree Ganesha, and in no time they were starting up the first pitch.

"Shoshala climbing has just begun guys!" Vartak clamored.

Over the sixteen days that followed they faced constant rainstorms that left them with only eleven days to complete the original nineteen pitches. They would start climbing at 6 a.m. and most often have to turn around by 3 p.m. because of storms, averaging just two or three pitches a day. Like the first ascent party, which had taken eighteen days to complete the route, the Indian team used fixed ropes to return to the ground instead of sleeping on the wall. In his 2012 report for the *American Alpine Journal*, Chevieux wrote:

*We were delayed by storms, which hit almost daily and discouraged us from bivouacking on the wall. We fixed ropes and jumared to our high point each day, but this often proved slow and painful. As bad weather frequently arrived by early afternoon, it left little time to push the*

*route forward. Lack of water was serious; we had to melt water from a snowfield that visibly diminished in the heat and disappeared on our last day.*

While waiting out the storms in their tents, the Indian team solved the water-sourcing problem by collecting rainfall, approximately 200 liters, using the waterproof bags they had brought for their backpacks.

By the time they finished the ninth pitch they were starting to adapt to the rock and altitude. The air was colder as they gained height, however, and their fingers would numb out, making it harder to climb.

Even as their progress brought them closer to the top of Shoshala, they also had to deal with "real-world problems." Joshi had received a termination letter from his office, Padval got infinite calls about his absence disrupting business, and Umbre dwelled on his family's stress. "*Job gela tari chahel, business gela tari chahel pan Shoshala sodnar nahi*" (I can lose my job or my business but I won't leave Shoshala), was their new mantra, spoken in their native Marathi language.

SEPTEMBER 27: "BLOOD FLOW! Blood flow!" Patil cheered himself as cold winds sucked his warmth and energy. It was past 3 p.m. and his body had nearly given up for the day, but it was a dazzling afternoon and they had to make the most of it. After jumaring for 600 meters he and Umbre had climbed pitches seventeen and eighteen, and now Patil pulled himself up an easy, low-angle crack, willing circulation into his frozen fingers.

A toaster-size block of stone came loose in his hand. He quickly set it back into the wall, grateful to have kept his partners safe. Vartak and Padval were hoisting themselves up the ropes below and would soon meet Umbre at the belay. Joshi had a fever and was resting in the tent while Aher captured Patil's struggle with the drone camera from base camp.

The crack led Patil to a slender ledge, where he found a bolt on a short headwall that was just a little taller than he was. Anchoring himself to the bolt, he hopped up and peered over the edge above him. At first he was confused. He saw blue sky where a vulture was flying, but there was nothing behind or above the granite fin. Then he realized he'd reached the top.

"Summit! Summit!" he screamed. All his tiredness vanished. Within an hour, four

of them straddled the towering ridge of Shoshala. On one side was Rakchham village, and on the other, Himalayan peaks loomed even higher from where they sat.

In January 2022 Aher and filmmaker Kopal Goyal released a documentary about the ascent, *The Rakchham Affair*, which can be viewed online.

"We hope the success will popularize the sport and change perceptions, which is a patient journey." Gaikwad said, referring to Indian big wall climbing. "[Patience] is exactly what Shoshala taught us!"

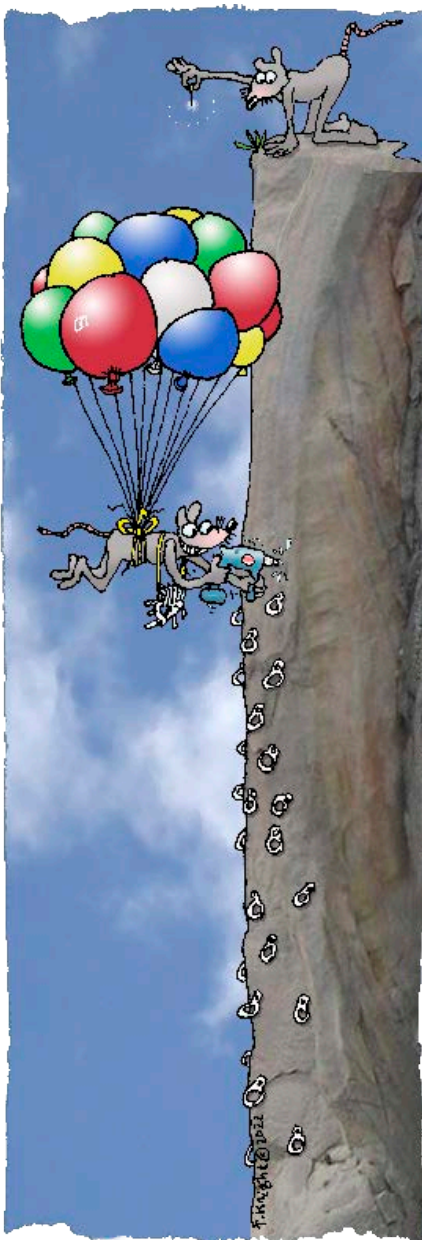
—Nutan Shinde-Pawar, Pune, India

## Towering

IF I HAD GROWN up in Juneau, I would never have turned forty without flying in a helicopter. But here I am, like a nervous teenager at the heliport, waiting for my first ride in a "bird." It is July 2, 2021. With a few days of sunshine in the forecast, Dea Huff and Laura Maruhashi are flying in to climb the South Buttress of the Main Mendenhall Tower. My partners Gabe Hayden and Dylan Miller are keen to use the same weather window, so we split the chopper five ways.

I have always appreciated long approaches. A hard trail and a heavy pack sharpen the intentions. Each step, like a stroke of the whittler's knife, carves away the scaly bark of lowland existence. Getting dumped out of a helicopter after a ten-minute flight from town feels comparatively irreverent.

A low cloud ceiling forced our pilot to drop us off slopeside, well below the standard basecamp. We set up our tents in a patch of rocks. Above, where there are supposedly some mountains we came to climb, there is only white. Admittedly, cheating the approach saved me a lot of energy that I'm going to need to keep up with my hotshot partners. Gabe is a complex assembly of gears that never stop turning. Dylan, smooth and steady, makes everything look easy. For my first visit to the range I would be happy to climb just one of the classic routes, but tomorrow the intention is to climb *all* of the classics—a route up each of the seven Mendenhall Towers. I'm not worthy, but I'm willing. To borrow a quote from the paper napkins Dea likes to set her table with at dinner parties, "That's a horrible idea. What time?"



The tiny sound of Gabe's alarm clock at 2 a.m. is like a key turning the ignition. The engine jolts to life with the rustling of bodies, the crackle of tent flies, the rumble of zippers, the purring of a camp stove. We were meant to start on the west end, First Tower, but the low heli-drop modified our logistics. As the morning light graduates through the grayscale, we plod up snow slopes to the base of the Fifth Tower.

Cliffside, we can see Laura and Dea below, dots on the snow approaching their own climb on Tower Three. The eastern horizon glows orange as we move up, an unroped

congregation in steady contact with young alpine granite. The rock is old though. Older than the Bible. And truer, at least by my reckoning. Jam the cracks. *Faith*. Hold the edges. *Faith*. Maybe I'm religious after all.

Up and up until Earth ends and we stand on the bristles of her back. We should stay here, soak in the warm sunshine and incredible views. With so much more to climb, we barely pause before descending. Down and up, and down and up again. Our bodies calibrate to the constant motion, and our minds sync into a nearly telepathic awareness of each other. We scramble, we simul, we slow down and belay for the occasional harder pitches.

On Tower Three they put me in the lead so that I can enjoy some of the finer climbing of the day. The plumb crack goes on longer than our seventy-meter ropes, so Gabe and Dylan are simul-climbing with me when I reach the belay ledge. Flat, long and wide enough to sit on, it is like a church pew hewn for believers. Dea is already there, anchored in the far corner against the wall, not quite smiling, belaying Laura who is out of sight above. On my end of the ledge, a shallow basin cups a shimmering pool. Inviting...

"Watch out don't touch that that's pee!"

I see my reflection in the puddle I almost drank from. I don't even know whose kidney Dea is using these days.

"Seriously, who pees on the ledge?"

"Get over it. It's harder for girls."

The top of the Main Tower is a rich sky bath. A white blanket of stratus cloaks every horizon, except where the mountains stand above it. Clouds and glaciers merge at an almost indiscernible line.

"They're like whale fins," Dylan says, pointing off to low peaks of the distant Chilkat Range, where smooth, dark angles arc out of a sea of clouds. Turning clockwise, we pan across so many mountains rising from the icefield. The massive headstone we're standing on casts a long shadow, but nobody mentions the two climbers buried in the tortured glacier below.

We make a side trip from our descent route to climb the Second Tower, known as the Midget. Then down the Mountaineers Route, a blocky gully that seems safer to down climb than to rappel. Until the bottom, where a double-rope rappel ends in the middle of a steep snow runnel, which we down climb for a hundred feet. It's easier for Gabe and me