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Trailer:

[Healing Cold, about the old tradition of coldtraining in Russia and Ukraine \(youtube.com\)](#)

INTRODUCTION

Despite being notoriously sensitive to the cold, I took up winter swimming for two reasons, the first being my love for Russia and Ukraine, two countries I have visited frequently over the past 30 years, initially as a photographer and later as a yoga teacher and winter swimmer. Over those years, I have learned to speak Russian well, which has opened doors that would otherwise have remained closed. Secondly, I would never have become a dedicated winter swimmer if I hadn't spent many years fighting a persistent virus. Today, I am thankful for how this illness led to my desperate search for a cure, which I eventually found in the icy water. It became my mission to share my experiences and knowledge with others.

Contrasting temperatures can make us stronger, a concept that people are all too familiar with in Russia. Russians come into daily contact with and are used to extreme contrasts. Ice-cold water immediately puts us in survival mode, making us stronger. Just a few seconds in the icy water is enough to reap its benefits. However, the desire to push boundaries in such cold environments is not without risk; there is a fine line between a healthy dose and an unhealthy overdose of cold.

Cold therapy is gaining popularity in the Netherlands, and quite rightly so. But we're still missing a lot of information because it's not part of our tradition. While in the Netherlands, the focus lies on pushing boundaries in cold environments, the age-old tradition of 'hardening' focuses on a milder approach. The time has come to broaden our horizons and look at countries with fierce winters and a centuries-old tradition of surviving and thriving in the cold.

The tradition of 'hardening', improving your health by gradually exposing your body to stress from the natural elements, stems primarily from Russia and Ukraine. The fact that this tradition is deeply rooted in society becomes apparent from the many proverbs I use to introduce each paragraph. I want to apologise in advance for writing 'Russians' when you could just as easily read Ukrainians or Belarussians, or, simply put, Russian speakers. These brother and sister countries share a close bond.

I also regularly use the word 'soul' instead of 'mind', 'spirit', or 'psyche'. The Russian word for soul, *dusha*, has a far deeper connotation than in our culture. It refers to both the heart and soul, but also the inner being and psyche. As a matter of interest, the term 'soul sickness' in the Netherlands was a common term until only about a century ago.

In March 2022, I was about to depart to the Ural Mountains and Siberia for a month-long study trip when war broke out in Ukraine. The door to Russia slammed shut. I was devastated. My work as a cold exposure trainer and tour operator was inextricably linked to both Russia and Ukraine.

I felt overcome by a combination of shame, guilt, anger, and grief that one of the two countries I loved most could start waging a brutal war against the other. For three months, I obsessively followed the news, but it made me so depressed that I realised I was probably better off avoiding it altogether. Instead, I wanted to do something. Thankfully, I was able to secure a position as a location manager at a shelter for Ukrainian refugees in the municipality of Lochem. It also inspired me to write this book, share my experiences and speak out positively about these inspiring countries.

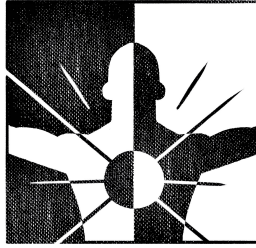
The contrast between East and West in terms of politics, language, and mindset means that much of the wisdom and knowledge from the former Soviet Union has remained hidden from the West. I want to introduce you to the wisdom from the Russian-speaking part of the world and those valuable insights into cold exposure training and lifestyle. This book combines personal experiences, wisdom stemming from age-old traditions, and findings from Russian and Ukrainian healthcare professionals. I hope my story inspires you to lead a life full of vitality.

Ewout

Ну, поехали!

Let's go!

Yuri Gagarin, cosmonaut



SOUL

Главная сила в человеке, это сила духа
The main force in man is the power of the spirit
Yuri Gagarin, cosmonaut

I was a scrawny, fragile boy at age five. ‘This young man needs to eat more and grow strong,’ our GP in Castricum said. Those words touched me in every fibre of my being. And so, I started to eat more, and was ill less often. My mother was impressed by the change in me, but there was more work to be done. I suffered from an extreme case of flat feet, and I had asthmatic bronchitis. My mother, a physical therapist, lovingly set me to work: I had to walk on tiptoe and grasp pencils with my feet, do blowing exercises with cotton wool, and take cold showers to strengthen my lungs.

My mother also encouraged me to go swimming in the freezing sea until far into the autumn months. The taller the waves, the more fun I had. In the summer, we would cycle to the ‘quiet beach’ every week. We would climb the last dune and then jump off and race down to the beach. Once we were in the water, we would clamp onto our mother’s neck, screaming whenever we saw a jellyfish. My sister and I would bury each other in the sand until only our heads stuck out. The dunes and the beach continued to be my natural habitat as many years later I took up running. My physical ailments slowly disappeared. Making myself stronger became a central theme in my life.

Winter in Russia

Лучше один раз увидеть, чем тысячу раз услышать
It is better to see once than hear a hundred times

Russia is everything I’m not: rugged, vast, and ominous. 1993 marks my first venture into this exciting new world. That summer, I take a series of photographs of St Petersburg. That’s where I meet Irina, who invites me that winter to visit her home village. I am fascinated by the contrasts in Russian life, and the process of hardening yourself to those contrasts. In the Netherlands, it’s all right to doze off and become complacent; everything’s taken care of for you. Apparently, I need to be rudely shaken awake.

It's minus thirty when we take the night train from Moscow to Lipetsk, some 600 kilometres further south. The stove on the train is broken; the carriage is one giant freezer on wheels. We're given a couple of extra blankets, and that's it. I find it rather harsh, but for the Russians, this is normal. Irina and I huddle close together under a large pile of blankets. My body isn't used to the fierce winter, and I catch a nasty cold. My chest is rubbed three times a day with vodka according to Russian tradition. My chest becomes fiery hot, and as I cough and spit, the slime in my body loses its hold on me. The vodka worked its magic. I had survived my first Russian winter.

Russian spirit of hardening

Полезен русскому здоровью наш укрепительный мороз
Our fortifying frost is beneficial to Russian health
Alexander Pushkin

Russia is not for the faint of heart. The country is notorious for its hot summers and harsh winters. Not just the climate but also the country's many capricious rulers have been putting their people to the test for centuries. Every aspect of life in Russia is confronting. Russians always say that they don't live; they survive. It's therefore no surprise that cold exposure training was invented in this country of extremes. Cold is no picnic for a warm-blooded being, but it does make you stronger. The cold shakes us awake, and all our systems go into overdrive and survival mode. It presses our red distress button and causes our internal emergency services to race out of the depot at full alert. And that leads to exceptional health benefits – provided we stay within safe limits.

The huge contrasts that Russians are exposed to are reflected in their *banya* culture. The famous Russian writer Tolstoy sums it up in a nutshell: 'A life without a banya is like a body without a soul.' The *banya* is the Russian version of a sauna. It is more refined, involving individual treatments with oak or birch branches. I would almost call it a shamanistic ritual. You do not often see an age-old cleansing ritual thriving in these modern times. In Russia, this banya ritual is known as 'contrast hardening', a form of hardening caused by extreme cold and heat exposure. The contrast bath is highly symbolic for Russia because life in Russia is one vast contrast bath.

The essence of cold exposure training can be summed up with the sweeping Russian term *zkalivanie*. This translates into English to the verb 'to harden'. A Russian-English dictionary will give you a very basic translation: 'To harden or temper the body, mind and steel.' When I ask Russian native speakers what *zkalivanie* means, they refer to having a strong resistance and being able to

adapt to all circumstances. I would say that the English word 'resilience' is a perfect translation of what this word entails. In answer to the question of how someone can be 'hardened', the official Russian dictionary, the *Large Explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language* has this to say about it: The process of 'hardening' an individual involves acclimatising that person to any form of hardship, shortage, adverse weather conditions; in short, educating them to adapt to severe circumstances.'

The deeper meaning behind 'hardening' is reflected in this definition, commonly used by physicians and other lifestyle institutes.

З а к а л и в а н и е : *hardening*

Hardening is an increase in the body's resistance and reserves to deal with the effects of natural factors within the boundaries of physical stress. Hardening should be considered a means to bring our lifestyle closer to nature, and to retain our natural resilience.

And now we come to the essence: hardening is about becoming stronger and healthier by literally coming into contact with the natural environment. Not just cold, but the heat from the sun or the banya completes the hardening process.

It's brilliant how the Russians thought up a counterbalance to all that hardening, a place to soften up again, open the heart and find comfort – the banya, society's womb. Becoming soft is an essential part of hardening. Hardening means warmth and cold, opening and closing, cleansing and strengthening. The Russian term 'contrast hardening' in the banya is revealing. Therefore, the importance of contrast will be a central theme throughout this book.

Cold as medicine in European history

'It is certain that cold water contracts and strengthens all nervous parts'

John Floyer, 1697

Sebastian Kneipp

'Die natur ist die beste apotheke'

'Nature is the best apothecary'

Sebastian Kneipp

Porfiri Ivanov

Революционер ничего не добьется, надо жить эволюционно
'Being revolutionary achieves nothing; we need to be evolutionary'

A group of Dutch people with fiery red-flushed cheeks regards me eagerly in a cabin in northern Russia. They have just swum in a hole in the ice and sweated in the banya. After dinner, they languidly await the next part of my programme. I introduce Lilia Grabrova, a manual therapist from St Petersburg, who I have invited to give a lecture about the legendary 'Soviet Iceman' Ivanov, the hardcore version of Kneipp. Lilia starts to tell her story, and I do my best to translate her words.

Spirit of the winter swimmer

Хочется, да не может
Wanting is not being able to

Addicted soul

В море водки и богатыри тонут
Even the strongest drown in a sea of vodka

Vodka is just like ice water; only a small dose feels good. The first glass heightens your sensation and gives you a warm glow. But that one glass is never enough, and slowly, the nightmare starts. Ironically, this isn't the only similarity between vodka and winter swimming. Vodka means 'little water', and has a numbing quality, as cold water does. And vodka is addictive, just like winter swimming. Physicians in Russia regularly need to remind winter swimmers of how addictive it can be. The endorphins released after winter swimming heighten your sense of euphoria and vitality. That is your reward for braving the cold water. It can even work as an antidepressant - but it does have its downsides. The euphoric feeling suppresses your body's warning signals regarding the cold. Moreover, an ecstatic winter swimmer may become addicted to the endorphins and be in danger of taking things too far.

Cleansing the soul

Время очищения настало, чтоб в душе спокойно, мирно стало
Fragment from a poem about baptism swimming from Tatanja Larina.
The time for cleansing has arrived, to calm and soothe the soul

People often refer to the mysterious Russian soul. This soul is not necessarily more profound than our Dutch soul; it's just a whole lot more expansive. After all, the Netherlands is a mere village compared to the vastness of Russia, a melting pot of countries and cultures that have come together over the years to form what was once the Soviet Union. The Netherlands is surveyable and transparent, and its residents are incredibly direct.

In Russia, much remains as hidden as the vast expanses of the Siberian taiga. And speaking your mind is not the finest quality to have under a strict regime. Russians have been forced to keep silent for centuries. A Russian's biggest enemy is another Russian. Except for a few years of *glasnost* under Gorbachev, Russia has never known a period of openness or reflection. Many Russians take refuge in alcohol or even flee the country. There's no other escape for the strong-willed. You can't change the system, but you can work on improving yourself, to walk towards the light and focus on positive things such as a healthy lifestyle. And that may include a need to cleanse yourself.

In the Russian language, ice water is directly linked to 'holy water' or 'healing water'. Meltwater is often referred to in this context. My ice swimming teacher, Yevgeny Zhitnov from Omsk, once said: 'The health benefits begin to kick in with water colder than ten degrees, but only ice water can truly produce a healing effect.' There's an apt metaphor for this phenomenon: a murky puddle of rainwater turns into a clear puddle of water once it's frozen over.

The Russian-speaking part of the world has an ancient cleansing ritual that uses ice water as baptism water. People believe that the ice-cold water cleanses the soul. In the olden days, the lunar phase determined the right moment. The first new moon around New Year's is the perfect moment for the ritual. That's when the moon's gravitational pull on our waters is at its weakest. There is a lull, like a broad beach when the sea gradually ebbs away from the shore, and so, during the calmest night of the year, we can let go and cleanse ourselves. This ritual's roots date back to the time of the Scythians, the nomadic warrior people from Southern Russia and Ukraine.

Winter in Moscow

Человек должен быть сам себе врачом
Be your own doctor

Winter in Kiev

Будь здорова як вода, а багата як земля
Be as healthy as water, as rich as the earth

We take the same metro from Hydropark station to Khreshchatyk. The metro is still travelling above ground, and the timbre of the wheels shifts as the train sways onto a bridge. The Dnieper River appears beneath us, a half-frozen river so wide it could be a lake. I can see Kyiv in the distance as we approach.

Kyiv is built on the hills and lands surrounding the Dnieper. This is where Nestor the monk (also known as Nestor the Chronicler) started to write his *Primary*

Chronicle in 1037. In 1051, the Kyiv-Pechersk Monastery – also known as the Kyivian Caves Monastery – was founded there. Nestor and his fellow monks remained and spent several decades working on his chronicle. His work includes the following passage, which I have translated literally from the thousand-year-old manuscript: ‘I saw a wondrous sight in the Slavic lands on my journey here. I saw wooden bathhouses, and they would heat themselves strongly, undress and stand naked. They would then rub themselves in with kvass (a cereal-based beverage) and wave and hit with rods until there was barely any life left in them, only to drench themselves in ice water to revive themselves. This they do with regularity, and all their suffering is at their own hands. This is how they cleanse themselves.’

Over a thousand years later, right across from the monastery where Nestor wrote these words, I would ‘suffer’ by my own hands in the Dnieper River. I meet my ice swimming friends at Hydropark. They make it clear that I should only breathe through my nose while running. This is how your body gradually takes up oxygen, causing you to warm up faster.

I step onto the metro with a healthy flush from the cold, but my rosy cheeks soon pale with each passing stop, when droves of people worm their way onto the train. I feel increasingly pressed in from all sides. As the train’s windows fog up, a wave of *peregara* washes over me, a nauseating stench of day-old vodka and garlic from the person standing next to me. But we’re packed like sardines, and I cannot escape their foul breath. The contrast with the pure ice water couldn’t be greater. I try to think of other, far more delightful, Ukrainian scents, like the scent of fresh dill at the market. Or the spicy aromas of a bowl of borscht, something I long for right this moment.

Winter in Siberia

Мороз и солнце – день чудесный! - Alexander Pushkin
Cold frost and sunshine: day of wonder!

Russia is very hospitable, which can make a stay on Russian soil pretty intense. I am invited to stay at Vladimir’s house, which means I can’t go off and be by myself. Vladimir doesn’t have an off-switch, and I’m his ‘project’. I try to be as accommodating as possible. It’s a process of giving and taking and setting boundaries, an often inspiring yet exhausting journey because his schedule – like his native Russia – knows no bounds.

It’s a clear night, with a full moon. Vladimir wakes me up in the middle of the night for a Siberian ritual. I blearily shuffle my way to the kitchen, where four red buckets stand in the middle of the floor, which we fill with tap water. Tap water in the Netherlands is a balmy 12 degrees, but only ice water flows through the

pipes in wintry Siberia! Vladimir solemnly sits down and falls silent. He places his hands on his chest and starts to recite a prayer in a deep voice. Although I don't understand everything, chills race down my spine. The prayer refers to the healing powers of 'Lady Water'. We step outside into the dark hallway dressed in swimming shorts, a towel wrapped around the waist, buckets of water in hand. We descend eight floors in a ramshackle lift to the ground floor, the water restlessly sloshing in the red buckets. I always breathe a silent sigh of relief when the lift 'lands' safely. It's thirty degrees below zero outside, and the snow crunches beneath our slippers. We're standing in the courtyard where carpets had been left to clean in the snow earlier that day.

The *oblivanie* is about to begin; we're about to soak ourselves with the buckets of ice water. This is the most common hardening method in Russia. Vladimir shows me how he first rubs water over himself, starting at the feet. And then he immediately pours the first bucket with ice-cold water via his belly and chest over his head. The second bucket goes straight over his chest and the top of his head. The idea is to pour slowly enough that a thin film of water glides over your skin. Now it's my turn. One, two, three, and . . . here goes. I see the moonlight reflected through a curtain of water, then put the bucket down and let out a deep sigh. It wasn't as bad as I had thought it would be, but I need a moment to process this. We're still standing there, steaming in the cold. Surprisingly, I feel warmth – except for my painful, cold feet. I start to hop up and down in the snow. Laughing, we run back to the flat. A couple of hearty yells follow in the tiny creaking lift.

After that night, we would repeat the ritual by drenching ourselves with buckets of ice water every morning. I didn't realise until later that every stab of cold can be a healing moment. And you reinforce that moment by turning it into a ritual, just like winter swimming as a form of baptism has become a ritual. You can reinforce the ritual with an affirmation, your inner mantra. Below, you will find the traditional Siberian prayer with which I was initiated in a cramped kitchen on the eighth floor of a tiny flat in Novosibirsk:

Lady Water

Czarina of the Gods

let me wash in you

let me heal

cleanse me

strengthen me

every cell in my body.

Vladimir sees a brother from a past life in me. Our intense yoga practices together are as much a source of connection as resistance. More initiations follow, such as a headstand on glass shards. Vladimir is wildly enthusiastic when a drop of blood appears between my eyebrows. He declares that my third eye has been opened. I docilely undergo my trials; when I look back on that time, I realise that Vladimir was a comet that led the way to a new universe, but at the time, the hardening tradition seemed to me something eccentric that I would never consider taking up myself.

Lowered resistance

Намучиться — научиться

To suffer is to learn

I return from Siberia in the winter of 2004, supple from the yoga and hardened by the ice water. I feel like I can take on the world and am ready to trade my single life for a new relationship. In the Netherlands, I meet a Ukranian woman. I am drawn in by her appearance and stories about her birthplace, Donetsk. She comes from a small village but eventually moved to the metropolis of St Petersburg. She eventually ends up in the Netherlands. After a couple of romantic weeks, the hammer finally falls on the supposed anvil: I fall grievously ill. I am driving in my car when a wave of nausea hits me. I pull over and climb into the back, hunched over in extreme pain.

I don't know how long I lay there. My body was caught up in an intense struggle. All my symptoms pointed to something I didn't want to think about, but there was no denying it: I had contracted herpes.

An explosive gift from the Donbas.

My immune system was shot to pieces. I had assumed I had built up a good constitution over the years, but my weakest link reared its head. When it came down to it, I didn't have enough reserves. They say that the worse the first herpes attack, the graver the disease's course. To make matters worse, I had promised to photograph my sister's wedding a couple of days later. I hid behind the camera as much as I could and bit back the pain. Everyone could see that something wasn't right, but I put on a brave face and refused to say anything about it, especially not at a wedding. It's not exactly a very sexy condition! And I needed time to process this first.

The relationship didn't last long after that.

Building up reserves

Трудности не изнуряют, а закаляют

Hardship doesn't wear us down; it strengthens us

I have found a physician who is specialised in treating the 'two big bastards', as he calls them, Lyme's disease and herpes. His office is in Maastricht, hardly around the corner. I spent six months making the long trip from Deventer each week. He's the first practitioner to give me hope by 'teaching the virus a lesson'. The 'lesson' in point is a drip containing colloidal silver, a virus-killing substance. The Greeks and Romans have been using silver as an antiseptic since a thousand years BCE. After the drip, my enemy is targeted further with electrotherapy at a specific frequency. I often drove back home feeling hopeful. It did bring some relief, but my financial reserves were dwindling. The treatments were incredibly expensive. My condition wasn't cured, and after those six months, I stopped wasting money.

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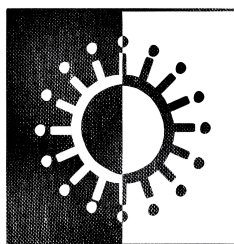
(I continue with my search for a cure using a variety of therapies)

Winter in St Petersburg

Верь в себя

Believe in yourself

It's incredibly slippery outside, and yet I stand rooted to the ground. I'm standing next to a hole in the ice at the foot of the fortified walls of St Peterburg's Peter and Paul Fortress. High up on the wall, a tiny blue-painted walrus marks the spot where thousands of Russians enter the water every winter. My gaze is not focused on the hole, but on a group of jogging Russians. Their chorus echoes in time to their pace: 'We are healthy, we believe in ourselves - we are healthy, we believe in ourselves.' The moment touches me deeply. Tears of cold and revelation stream down my face. Upon hearing this mantra here in Russia, everything falls in place. All this time, I hadn't believed enough in myself. It sounds so simple, but to me, this is indeed what it is: a revelation.



WARMTH

Где тепло, тут и добро
Where it's warm, all is good

In Novosibirsk, I see a lorry driver lighting a fire beneath his engine. It takes me a few moments to realise he's not burning the engine; he's defrosting it, just as when we prepare for cold hardening, we 'defrost' our engine, our heart and our veins and arteries. Warming up our engine is the only way to function properly in the cold. Just a mindset or a breathing technique is insufficient to warm up and get the circulation going. You always need some sort of physical action as a source of warmth to push the cold away, like a hot potato repulsing the surrounding snow.

I have deliberately started with a chapter about warmth before moving on to talking about the cold. In 'Warmth', I will outline what you need to brave the cold. A healthy lifestyle and a basically sound condition are necessary before moving on to intense cold-hardening methods such as winter swimming. Regularly engaging in active exercise or sports is a minimum requirement. Frequent visits to the sauna are also an excellent way to prepare your cardiovascular system. Classic yoga offers fantastic breathing techniques that can raise our physical condition to a higher level. We must build up our basic reserves before we can safely start to work on more demanding, cold-hardening methods.

Everything begins with warmth. At birth, we leave our mother's warm womb and enter a world with temperature differences and contrasts. All cold exposure training should start from this protective warmth. A basic principle of the banya tradition is that you are only allowed to enter the ice water with a thoroughly heated body, like a steaming casserole fresh from the oven.

A healthy cold-hardening treatment should always contain contrasts in temperature between warming up, cooling down, and warming back up again. If you feel the need to do something, do a physical warm-up. If you need to take some rest, go to a sauna. The extremes of cold and heat reinforce each other. That is contrast hardening.

Follow the seasons

Не пугай зима, придёт весна

Do not fear the winter; spring is on its way

Contrast hardening

Снегом да паром, так не будешь старым

With snow and steam, you'll never age

Sports and exercise

В Мороз пробежка лучше шубы греет

In the cold, running keeps you warmer than a fur coat

Exercise warms you up. It's 6th January 1985, and I'm running a half marathon at Egmond aan Zee. There's snow on the ground, and the temperature is minus six degrees. I decide not to wear my gloves, trusting that my hands will warm up during the run. I intensely regret this decision during the first five kilometres. My hands feel like ice cubes. But then comes the moment of release when they start to burn. For the remainder of my run they are wonderfully warm.

Exercise is an essential part of cold hardening. Just like the cold, exercise can act as a medicine. Thirty to forty minutes of daily light exercise, such as walking, decreases by half your chances of catching an illness from an infection. Exercise is a type of hormesis. It triggers our immune system and acts as an effective anti-inflammatory agent. Exercise is even good for our memory.

Sauna

Жаркий пар любой недуг исцелит

Hot steam will cure any condition

Steam in the banya

Баня парит, баня правит, баня все поправит

The banya rises, the banya rules, the banya restores

A banya is a traditional Russian wood-fired sauna, less hot and more humid than a Finnish sauna. The banya is a reflection of Russia's soul. A harsh society and fierce winters will expose you to extreme contrasts. It makes sense that a powerful remedy was devised to counter this that would cleanse, nourish and heal. And that remedy is reflected in the age-old banya and bathhouse tradition. Russians and Cossacks visiting Europe in past centuries thought we were disgusting people, trying to mask the smell of our unwashed bodies with perfumes. People were a lot more hygienic in Russia. In the banya, sweat and dirt were secreted and rinsed off, and the skin was then sealed with ice water. Unfamiliar visitors would first be cleansed in the banya before being allowed into their hosts' homes.

According to tradition, temptations such as alcohol and intimate encounters are strictly forbidden in a banya. But the Russian people like to bend the rules. Men and women are kept separate; most bathhouses don't appreciate being associated with a swingers club. Besides, private banyas are available for rent everywhere. During my stay in Novosibirsk, I visit one of those private banyas with friends. We find a bedroom there with mirrors on the ceiling. I had to laugh, but my Russian friends didn't think it was odd. According to legend, the famous mystic and holy man Rasputin, from the time of the tsars, would regularly take women to the banya to find out how spiritual the ladies were. The women, in turn, got to find out how well-endowed Rasputin was because it was an open secret that he was a very virile man. 'Salvation through sin' was this licentious monk's life motto. After Rasputin's murder in 1916, his manhood was believed to have been cut off. What follows is a rather fanciful history about a travelling penis preserved in a jar. A museum in St Petersburg now claims to be the proud owner of the jar in question, although its authenticity has not been proven.

Theory is one thing, but at the banya, practice is everything. I have to send countless films of my oak-branch-wielding skills for my training to become a banya master. I sometimes need to dig deep to find the many technical terms you won't find in any ordinary dictionary. This only heightens my sense of accomplishment when I am awarded the title of certified banya master in the summer of 2021. This is where the real work begins. I give my friends treatments, but I realise something essential is missing. I myself have never personally been treated by a real master.

Which is why I was scheduled to go on a study trip to the Ural Mountains in March of 2022. But then the war in Ukraine broke out, and I had to find the expertise I needed closer to home. Thankfully, I found Viktor Janzen, a Russian banya master in Germany! Viktor was born in a tiny village in the Ural Mountains. When he was 17, he moved to Germany with his parents. He became a swimming teacher and an aufgass employee in a sauna. His homesickness for his Central-Russian roots caused Viktor to develop an interest in the banya culture. He took lessons from famous banya masters and had a banya built in his native village. The cabin was loaded like a giant DIY-kit on a train from Germany. I sign up with Viktor for a treatment session and personal training.

I breathe deeply and sink into the icy water with a sigh. After a couple of breaths, I feel the quiet settle in me. I wait a few moments, and then hear Viktor calling 'Okunaj!' from the banya. I lower myself further into the water three times, submerging my head each time. I step out of the pool, feeling reborn. My skin feels taut and strong. An enormous sense of power and heat is released. My body's steaming like a horse, and the cold no longer has any hold on me. In the banya world, that is referred to as wearing a 'costume'. That costume is the tight skin keeping out the cold. With my cold skin now as tight as a membrane, the banya master is allowed to strike the skin. It doesn't hurt. With oak leaves as his striking tool, he whips and waves away the blockades and tensions in my body. As Viktor subtly points out, it's not about 'ydarit' - hitting - but about 'darit' - giving. The intense and highly educational day ends with a dinner table richly laid out with Russian dishes.

When is warmth needed and when do you apply cold?

Держи ноги в тепле, а голова в холоде

Keep the feet warm and the head cool

Diaphragm training and organ massage

Диафрагма 'второе сердце' для венозного кровообращения

The diaphragm is a second heart for the venous circulation.'

A. Zalmanov, Lenin's physician

Breath

Хорошо приучить себя дышать носом во время бега.

'Learn to breathe through your nose while running'

Nikolai Amosov, cardiovascular surgeon

Heat regulation during a hard frost

Мороз горячит кровь - СССР Профессор, доктор медицины К.С.Тринчер

'Frost warms the blood'

Soviet professor of medicine K.S. Trinchler

Winter clothing

Без шубы и валенок — и зима без конца

Without a fur coat and felt boots, winter lasts forever

An ice fisherman is so overdressed that he overheats as soon as he starts to move, just like a polar bear overheats when it's been running for too long. To weather the sharp frost while sitting still for hours, the experienced ice fisherman wraps himself in numerous layers. His shoes are crucial; a warm body starts with warm feet. A traditional Siberian recipe for warm feet calls for ground mustard in the socks. The socks are then dressed in warm *valenki*, the felt boots that continue to be popular even today.

The kidneys: the weakest link and the holy grail

Холод проникает в организм именно через почки

'Cold enters our bodies through the kidneys in particular'

S.G. Chojzhinimaevoy, chief physician at the Clinic of Tibetan Medicine in Moscow

Shortly after Christmas in 1993, I find myself on Moscow's Red Square at dawn. The domes of St Basil's Cathedral create a fairy-tale-like silhouette against the deep-blue dawn sky. Red stars sit on top of the Kremlin towers. It is minus 30 degrees Celsius outside, and I'm using an external battery pack for my Pentax67 camera. A cord connects the camera to the batteries in my inner jacket pocket. They would never last in the ice-cold camera.

According to Tibetan medicine, the kidneys are our body's batteries. Healthy kidneys

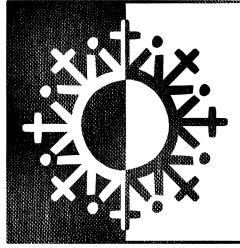
contain energy reserves to survive. And just like real batteries, they're sensitive to cold temperatures. They're a weak link in the cold-hardening process. Tibetan physicians believe that the kidneys are linked to the water element and the winter season. What does that mean in practice, and how do kidneys act as a thermal bridge? No less than 60 litres of blood passes through the kidneys every hour. When the kidneys cool down, either because we're poorly dressed or exposed to the cold for long periods, our blood starts to cool. It's a highly effective cooling system for our entire body.

Preparing for the cold hardening process

Без очищения нет исцеления.

'No healing without cleansing'

Gennadiy Malachov, healthy lifestyle author



COLD

Холод это повод
Cold is a motivator

Over the course of several years, I expose myself to the contrasting elements. At one point, the churning Dnieper River almost drags me under the precarious ice, but less than a kilometre upstream and a few days later, I experience the Dnieper's healing power when I submerge myself in a hole in the ice across from the cave monasteries in Kyiv.

A hostile virus from the Donbas leaves me reeling for years. I withdraw into myself like a monk and obsessively practice yoga. I am initiated into the ancient tradition of cold hardening at a freezing minus 30 degrees in the middle of the night in Siberia.

And outside the fortress walls of St Petersburg, my soul is laid bare, and I experience an epiphany. And now, back in the Netherlands, it is time to give my immune system a wake-up call. I run to the IJssel River, full of fiery promise. I had seen the Russian documentary *Kholod* (Холод, meaning cold) about the destructive and healing power of ice water. The chairman of the Russian Winter Swimming Federation, Vladimir Grebyonkin, leaves a lasting impression on me. According to Grebyonkin, there are three important reasons to go winter swimming. 'First, the vital organs receive three times the normal blood volume. This flushes the organs clean. Secondly, the water can cause our core body temperature to spike briefly. This activates our immune system to combat viruses and germs. And finally, it releases endorphins, making you feel fantastic.' Despite my sensitivity to the cold, these words were enough to motivate me.

It has been freezing for a couple of days now. Steam rises off the silently flowing waters of the IJssel River in the cold morning air. I have an intense desire to run and warm up because my chronic viral infection has made me sensitive to the cold. As the crow flies, the IJssel River is 400 metres away from our house. I run across the railway bridge at a brisk pace, undress on the riverbank, where the dim morning light makes me feel less naked. I carefully make my way over the loose sand into the river. I shiver when I first come into contact with the water. I wade out until the water reaches my thighs, then I slowly lower myself into the water, and my body instantly starts gasping for breath. The current tugs at my body, and I dig my toes into the bottom for a firmer foothold. The river eddies around my skin. Suddenly, I have my breathing back under control,

and everything falls silent. Then I slowly make my way back to the tiny beach. Back on shore, it hits me: wow, did I really just do that?

I am instantly addicted to that clean feeling after the cold. After that first baptism by ice, I visit the IJssel three times a week. Suddenly, my morning runs have much more meaning because it takes me to that intimate meeting with the river. I have found a spot, far away from everything, where I can focus. And every time I step out of the water, I feel like I'm glowing. I nurture that feeling over time by visualising the glow. As soon as I come home, I do my Tibetan exercises. Everything feels so much lighter.

Ice water

Ледяная вода, для хвори беда

Ice water, the bane of every disease

My leaky immune system seems to have been repaired: my virus symptoms completely disappeared after that first dip in the IJssel River! It sounds unbelievable after having spent so many years finding a cure, but it's the truth. After my first winter swimming season, my body feels clean and hardened, like a muddy rain puddle that has turned clear after the frost. My symptoms have been gone for three months now, and I can still hardly believe it. I mentally go through my lifestyle and habits and try to figure out if something else might have caused this change. But I'm slowly starting to believe in the power of ice water. I can't help but notice that the cold showers I have taken my entire life weren't powerful enough to kill the virus. It seems that it takes ice water to do that for me.

Omsk walrus club

Зимой ты в клуб моржей спешишь, там ждут тебя мороз, солнце, и Иртыш!

'Rush to the walrus club, where frost, sun and the Irtysh await!' (the Irtysh River in Siberia)

Y.M. Zhitnov, Omsk walrus club

With the wondrous amazement with which I experience the sudden disappearance of my symptoms comes the realisation that I have another task ahead of me: to share my experiences with other fellow sufferers with weakened immune systems. It feels like a mission. But first, I want to learn all there is to know about cold hardening. And so, I decide to visit the mecca of hardening: Siberia. While surfing the Internet, I come across inspiring images from the Omsk Walrus Club. I email them, asking whether I could visit and study with them. That same day, I receive a reply. Of course! They're overjoyed to learn that someone from the Netherlands wants to visit Omsk!

Instruction

Тысячелетний опыт Русского закала - В. Иванченко, врач и писатель

'A thousand years of experience with Russian hardening'

V. Ivanchenko, physician and author

I learn a lot about healthy cold-hardening techniques both on the ice and in Omsk

Walrus Club's tiny office. Omsk Walrus Club has been around for a respectable 55 years. Founder, chairman and coach Yevgeniy Zhitnov enthusiastically tells me about his life's work. A doctor who is an enthusiastic club member sometimes joins in the conversation. It soon becomes clear that this is not about achievement but about health. Yevgeny has this to say about how long you should swim in the ice water: 'It only takes a minute to receive all the health benefits; you don't need to swim longer.' From here on, this chapter will primarily serve as a guide for cold-hardening techniques and methodologies. Traditional cold hardening is based on five principles, which serve as medication instructions for the medicine we refer to as cold:

The five principles of cold hardening:

Divide into doses

Warming-up

Gradualism

Regularity

Keep moving

The art of dosage

'У каждого своя норма, у каждого своя мерка'

Everyone has their own standard, and everyone has their own measure'

Sergei Maksimov, Moscow Walrus Club

On a mission in Russia

Россия начинается, где асфальт кончается

Russia begins where the asphalt ends

Mild cold hardening

Водой холодной обтирайся, если хочешь быть здоров

If you want to stay healthy, rub yourself in with cold water

Fragment from a Soviet song

Cold hardening doesn't have to be difficult. During my workshops in the Netherlands, I notice that I have a tough time convincing experienced participants that it really can be quite simple. A minimal dose of frost and ice water is enough to reap its healing benefits. Constantly pushing your boundaries just keeps you in the danger zone and depletes your reserves. The power lies in the technique's simplicity: less is more.

With mild hardening, your body develops an increased resistance without the risk of driving yourself to exhaustion. The methods I've outlined below from the hardening tradition are mild enough for everyone to apply these techniques daily. You don't need to warm up beforehand for mild cold hardening. Brown fat, the fatty layer that keeps us warm, is activated by a temperature of 18 degrees and lower.

Traditional cold hardening

Надо непременно встряхивать себя физически, чтобы быть
здоровым нравственно

'You must shake yourself awake physically to become mentally healthy'

Lev Tolstoy

The poet Alexander Pushkin writes in rhythmic rhyme about a contrast bath in the fairy tale titled *The Little Hunchback Horse*. The main character is the layabout farmer's son, Ivan, who becomes a tsar at the end of the story, and he does so through a most unusual rejuvenation ritual. Three cauldrons stand in a room, one with hot milk, the second with hot water and the third with ice water from the river. Ivan jumps into the cauldron with hot milk, followed by the cauldron with hot water. And then the tsar commands him to jump into the cauldron with ice water. The tsar tries to follow him, but he is not hardened enough and doesn't survive the baths. On the other hand, Ivan steps out of the last cauldron as a handsome young nobleman. The tsarina instantly falls in love and marries him.

Today, we all live in comfort like the tsar, and we need to train to become as hardened as Ivan, the farmer's son. Our bodies are essentially lazy and could use a nudge in the right direction. The five traditional cold-hardening methods differ from the mild methods because of their more intense contact with the natural elements. This intense contact gives a shock effect, and the body briefly enters survival mode. Your body needs to have a basic level of constitution to process the shock.

Traditional cold hardening

Air showers

Pouring buckets

Immersion

Steaming

Ice swimming

The Russian names sound almost poetic. Written down phonetically, they include: *zakalivaniye* (hardening), *palaskaniye* (rinsing the face and throat), *aptiraniye* (cold rubbing), *rastiraniye* (warm rubbing), *aplivaniye* (pouring buckets), *okunaniye* (dipping), *morzjevaniye* (ice swimming), *pareniye* (steaming, banya).

Cold hardening can be healing and a revelation on the one hand. On the other hand, it requires a heightened constitution and body awareness. In ice water, there is a very thin line between a healthy dose and an overdose. The numbing quality of the water gives us no warning to let us know when we've crossed that line. These powerful techniques cannot be compared with going for a run or a boot camp. This is much more intense, both physiologically and immunologically. The Soviet physician Valery Ivanchenko wrote the following in his 1985 book *The Secrets of Russian Hardening*: 'The colder it is, the more the organism's deepest reserves are mobilised. This speeds

up the hardening process, but at the same time, it also increases the risk of overstepping boundaries.'

Cold hardening instructions

Добре бути лікарем: сам собі пан

Be your own doctor and become your own master

Guidelines for maximum swimming times in ice water

table

Energy leaks

Природа, время и терпение — три великих врача

Patience, time and nature are life's great doctors

An ice swimming adventure

Он живёт в царстве льда, где плещется ледяная вода.

'He lives in a kingdom of ice, where the icy water splashes'

Yevgeniy Zhitnov, Omsk Walrus Club

Cold as medicine and poison

Холод целебный — чудо волшебное

Healing cold, wondrous magic

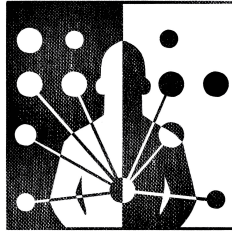
Dosage is everything. And that dosage is highly personal because everyone is unique and has a one-of-a-kind DNA profile and condition. Every winter season, Russian talk shows are riddled with discussions between the supporters and opponents of cold hardening. Both sides can lay claim to some of the truth because the opponents are right when it comes to a cold overdose, and the supporters are right regarding a healthy cold dose. Cold can act as a medicine given the correct dose. According to my mentor Zhitnov, "No exercise in the world can produce the same health benefits as one minute of ice swimming". On the other hand, too much cold is 'toxic', a wolf in sheep's clothing that quietly sucks the life out of you. So it goes without saying that a healthy respect for and knowledge about the impact of this ancient element, ice water, is in order.

Health benefits

The health benefits of well-balanced cold exposure training can be immense. The following is an overview where I emphasise the insights gained by Russian and Ukrainian healthcare professionals because their culture and climate include extensive experience in dealing with the cold. For each aspect, I will outline both sides of the coin: the effects of a correct dose and the risks of an overdose. An overdose could

involve being in the cold for too long or too often, a heightened sensitivity to cold (due to lack of training or an illness) or a too-sudden transition to the cold.

- 1. Metabolism*
- 2. Immune system*
- 3. Blood circulation*
- 4. Tone*
- 5. Hormones*



LIFESTYLE

Труд закаляет, сон освежает
Work strengthens, while sleep refreshes

I am convinced that my healthy lifestyle provided the foundation for the cold to do its wondrous work. I am still amazed at the suddenness with which my chronic viral infection disappeared after I had taken up winter swimming. But to be fair, by that time, I had been working on a healthy lifestyle for years. Yoga played an important role, but it all started with sports. Since my teenage years, I trained as a middle-distance runner at the AV Castricum athletics club, uniquely situated in the forests of the North Holland Dune Reserve.

My favourite training sessions didn't take place on the track but among the dunes. The meditative long-distance runs through the valleys of what I had dubbed 'little Mongolia' helped me clear my head. My environmental studies course at the university led me to Deventer, where I took up *wushu* martial arts in addition to my running practice. A whole new world and range of movement revealed itself to me. I was introduced to cat-like leaps and movements. My body had to get used to the change, and I would work up quite a sweat with each training. Each session ended with plenty of stretching exercises. Wushu made me strong and flexible.

Space yoga

'Бога не видел. Там всё темно'.
'I didn't see God. Everything was dark there.'
Yuri Gagarin after his space flight

In contrast to the dogmatism of Soviet authorities, Soviet scientists were very open-minded. Even mediums and yogis were consulted in the name of science. This type of research was conducted behind closed doors. The space medicine field secretly worked on many techniques involving yoga and breathing techniques. Many of Buteyko's insights came from this field.

Ukrainian yoga

Добре бути лікарем: сам собі пан
розумієш, що таке йога

'Once you can relax in even the most difficult asanas, you'll understand what yoga is'

Oleg Linikh, yoga teacher from Kherson

After two inspiring retreats in Novosibirsk, Vladimir advises me to visit Ukraine. Vladimir had been trained there, and he was impressed by the high level of instruction. Ukraine, not India, was the place to be for Russian yoga practitioners. It was time to head to Ukraine!

Girevoy sport

Труд – первое лекарство от всех болезней

Work - the best medicine for any illness

Hydropark Kyiv

Хто спортом займається, той сили набирається

Those who practice sports, gain strength

Rehabilitation hero

Верить в себя — верить в свои силы!

Believe in yourself, believe in your strength!

Borscht and buckwheat

Борщ та каша — їжа наша

Borscht and porridge are our daily food

Pork fat and bone broth

На селі лікар — піч, а свиня — гастроном

In the village, our oven is a 'doctor', and the pig is our 'deli'

Tea and kvass

Если чай не пьешь, где силы берешь?

Where would you be without a cup of tea?

One hundred grams

Кто водку любит, сам себя губит

To love vodka is to sink deep

The call of the wild

Не поклонясь до земли и грибов не поднимешь

You can't gather mushrooms without bowing down to the earth

A nature lover resides in the heart of every Soviet. Most of the population has a direct link to the countryside. Almost everyone has parents or grandparents living in a village somewhere. And village life is far more closely linked to nature than here. Everyone has a vegetable garden, chickens and sometimes a pig or cow. The nearby forest is a source of berries, mushrooms, and herbs. People catch fish in the rivers and lakes. Being close to nature and that feeling of self-sufficiency provides a sense of freedom, which is why many city dwellers own a second countryside cottage, or *dacha*, to briefly escape the system. And if such an escape can result in a group of drunken hunters who are more a danger to each other than the animals themselves, well, that's life.

Pharmacy and medicine

Сміх краще лікує, ніж усі ліки

Laughter is the best medicine

Lifestyle doctors

Двигайся больше — проживешь дольше

Move more, live longer

Since 1980, the Communist Party has been emphasizing the role of Soviet medicine in health promotion and prevention. I can't help but notice how many books about hardening were published in the 1980s. I also notice that doctors in Russia and Ukraine have their own television shows. Lifestyle tips for improving your health are a central theme in many of these programmes.

During the Soviet period, two physicians in particular left their mark on the healthy lifestyle concept. In the vast book repository, my eye is drawn to publications from both doctors who, as it turns out, were much more famous than Bubnovsky: Nikolai Amosov, a cardiovascular surgeon, and Ivan Neumyvakin, a flight surgeon. They both believed that everyone should take responsibility for their health. They both published numerous books and appeared regularly in the media. And they both advocated a holistic approach to human health. They were contemporaries and, therefore, frequently worked together in space medicine circles. A summary of their ideas follows below.

Nikolai Amosov (1913-2002)

Добыть и сохранить здоровье, может только сам человек

'Only you can achieve and maintain good health'

Ivan Neumyvakin (1928-2018)

Живой организм — это своего рода жидкий кристалл

'The nature of a living organism is like a liquid crystal'

Ivan Neumyvakin

Ivan Pavlovicj Neumyvakin grew up in Kyrgyzstan, the son of the village healer. He was a talented young man and went on to study medicine. During his studies in 1949, He researched the role of carbon dioxide in regulating the gas exchange in our bodies. He later studied this topic further in depth. He started his career as a military doctor for various Air Force departments and developed himself further to become a professor in medical science. In 1959, he became head of the Soviet Union's space programme's medical team. He was in charge of an unconventional medical programme whose main goal was to keep the cosmonauts healthy in space.

Cold exposure training at school

Солнце, воздух и вода - наши лучшие друзья

Sunlight, air and water are our best friends

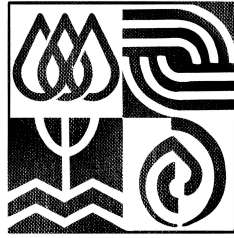
Soviet chant at pioneer camps

Ozerki walrus club

Моржевание – это не спорт, а образ жизни

'Winter swimming is not a sport; it's a way of life'

Andrei Vasiliev, Ozerki walrus club coach



THE ELEMENTS

Мы все дети матери природы
'We are all children of Mother Nature'
Porfiri Ivanov

A naked human being is vulnerable to the elements. The ice age would have wiped us out if it hadn't been for fire and clothing. Therefore, a microdose is enough in an ice bath to create a beneficial effect. Hardening involves small doses of stress from the natural elements. The sunlight on your skin, the ground beneath your bare feet, the fresh air you breathe – and the ice-cold water on your skin. Tibetan medicine states that our health is determined by how well-balanced we are in relation to the elements in our bodies and the nature surrounding us. Everything is linked together. By literally coming into contact with the elements, we also come into contact with our inner nature. In urban environments, we alienate ourselves from our nature. Ice water is a powerful ancient element with the unique characteristic that it can reset our bodies. It allows us to reboot to our factory settings, to what nature intended us to be.

Earth

Землю уважай, она дает урожай
Respect the earth, as she provides us with the harvest

Water

Вода пришла — беда прошла
The water came, and trouble passed

Snow, ice water, warm water, steam; water in every form has healing properties. We drink water, and we are mostly made up of water. And water flows like a central theme throughout this book. Cold water healed me. There is so much to say about this wondrous element. Nowadays, I tend to fall silent and bow my head in deep respect in the presence of this element. I fell silent as I sat on the rocks and watched the ice-blue churning waters of the River Soča in Slovenia, so clear and pure that you could see the trout swimming beneath its surface. I fell silent when I first saw Lake Baikal in Siberia, the largest freshwater lake in the world. Every winter, Baikal is covered in a

phenomenal layer of crystal-clear, cobalt-blue ice one and a half metres thick. White air pockets and cracks add structure to this natural work of art, creating some of the most beautiful ice formations in the world. And I still fall silent on my familiar beach near Bakkum, where I have run countless miles over the years, whenever the North Sea comes into view for the first time. I also fall silent on the frozen forest pond near Nieuw Rande whenever we cut a large hole out of the ice and see the breathtaking and ever-changing IJssel River, so close to home. Where would we be without water?

Fire

Огонь чистит, вода моет
Fire cleanses, water washes

Air

Необходимо ежедневно двигаться на свежем воздухе независимо от погоды.
Advice from space doctor Ivan Neumyvakin:
'Exercise in the outdoors every day, regardless of the weather'

Space

Простору на все четыре стороны много
There is plenty of space on all sides

Three constitutions

Хотя различают много болезней, но их можно свети только к двум: жару и холоду - Чжуд-ши.
'Although there are many illnesses, they can all be brought back to two factors: heat and cold.'
Tibetan medicine source text from Gyud-Shi (written in the fourth century).

Conclusion:

After seven years of illness, I found the light at the end of the tunnel when I took up winter swimming. I am eternally thankful for the element of water, or 'Lady Water,' according to the Siberian prayer. I am also immensely grateful that the age-old Ukrainian-Russian hardening tradition has revealed its secrets to me. It is an honour to be able to pass on this wisdom. Let the cold heal you, and let your deeply rooted respect for the element of water define your personal ritual.