

## CHAPTER ONE

# Wake-Up Call

Ignacio Rodríguez was anxiously awaiting his turn at the cardiologist's. At forty-two years of age, he still couldn't believe that he had heart trouble. He had always been a healthy man. Lately he had been working eighteen hours a day, Monday through Saturday, stopping only to sleep. He had neglected his children, his wife, and his body. He never did any exercise. He drank and smoked too much. He ate mostly fast food, because he often had lunch at the office while he was working.

He still remembered the day his father died. Before dying, don José asked him to take on the general management of R & G, a large family import business. José Rodríguez had built R & G into the market leader and now Ignacio had the responsibility of keeping the firm in that position. But things had become complicated. He felt like one of those surfers who row with their arms against the tide to get out among the waves, but don't manage to go far enough out to sea. The waves of change affecting R & G were so strong that with each wave he was

thrown farther back than the progress he had made, and he found himself in a vicious circle of effort and exhaustion.

Deregulation and globalization had opened the way for large companies, with economies of scale, to establish themselves in the country. There were price wars and increased competition in a now-smaller market affected by the recession. The few national competitors who were left were forming alliances with transnationals. R & G was the only company working alone with domestic capital. The increase in competition had struck at the worst possible time. For two years now the balance sheets had been recording losses and the company was in debt. The banks had cut off the firm's credit and some had even started legal action to recover their loans. The last days of the month were torture for Ignacio, because he often didn't have money available to pay his workers. He had already reduced staff twice, but this was still not enough to balance the books.

The atmosphere at R & G was tense and full of uncertainty. Employees were unmotivated and talked among themselves about how different things had been when don José was managing the company. They had lost their confidence in Ignacio and they looked back with nostalgia to the times when the company had been successful.

Just one week earlier, the sales manager had handed in his letter of resignation, admitting that he was going over to the competition for twice the salary. Ignacio had been furious, shouting and insulting the man, but in the middle of it all he had felt a very sharp pain in his chest, under the sternum. He felt pressure on his chest and his left arm went numb. Then he felt very agitated and found that he couldn't breathe properly, and he fainted. Hours later, in the clinic, they told him that he had

had an attack of angina pectoris, commonly known as a heart attack, and he was very lucky to be alive. At his age, a high percentage of people with heart conditions lose their lives.

A week after the incident, Ignacio felt so well that he really thought he was wasting his time waiting to see the doctor. Three days in the clinic had been more than enough to fill him with anxiety to get back to the company to sort out the backlog of work.

At last the doctor showed him into his office. He first confirmed Ignacio's optimism.

"Surprising!" he said. "Your heart has recovered faster than normal."

Ignacio sprang up from his chair.

"Great! Now, Doctor, I think it's time I was back in the office to deal with my work—"

"Not so fast," said the doctor sternly, taking hold of his arm. "Take this seriously, Ignacio. You must understand that you have two possibilities: if you go on living an unbalanced life, with constant anxiety and stress, I give you only a few more years before a fatal heart attack. But if you make a radical change in your lifestyle, you'll have a healthier, longer life. It's your decision. You'd better take care of yourself. It is very risky to have a heart attack at your age. I don't have statistics of deaths from heart attacks in age groups, but from my own experience with my patients, at your age approximately half of the patients who have a heart attack die."

"Oh, come on, don't exaggerate!" said Ignacio, looking at the doctor with a gesture of incredulity. "You've seen how quickly I've gotten over it. Don't worry, I'm made of steel and I'm going to be around a long time yet. Now please excuse me;

I must get back to the company to prevent any greater evils. You can never really relax when your subordinates are running the show.”

The doctor looked at him indulgently, as if Ignacio were a child who was incapable of seeing the mistakes he was making.

“Look, Ignacio, you are free to decide what to do with your life. If you choose to die, that’s your decision. But please stop thinking so much about yourself and think of your children. You have two little kids. Don’t let them lose their father at their age. That would mark them for life.”

“OK,” said Ignacio and he sat down again with resignation. “What do I have to do?”

The doctor suggested that he lead a more balanced life and start eating a healthy diet; he asked him to give up smoking, and if he drank liquor, to do so in moderation; and he told him to reduce the pace of his work and the stress.

“Doctor, I can do all that; but what I can’t help and can’t control are the problems in the office, the aggressive behavior of the competition, the company’s lack of money, and the recession.”

“Right,” replied the doctor, “but what you can control is your reaction to those stimuli. You need to relax and learn to have a different perspective on life. Have you heard of meditation?”

“Sorry, Doctor, but I don’t believe in any of those esoteric things,” answered Ignacio somewhat complacently. “My wife is into that kind of thing. I find it ridiculous.”

While he spoke, Ignacio looked at his watch and shifted in his seat as if he did not fit into it. The doctor felt that the only way to convince him was to get directly to the point.

“Ignacio, the subject of meditation is no longer considered esoteric. It has even been researched by very serious universities. Dr. Benson, of Harvard, mentions a study about the effects of meditation on Buddhist monks in Tibet.<sup>1</sup> The results were astonishing. The human body has a mechanism called the fight-or-flight response, which dates back to when we human beings lived in caves. In those times, when we perceived a threatening stimulus, such as the roar of a wild animal, we would automatically prepare to fight or run away. The hypothalamus, a gland near the brain, orchestrated a whole physiological reaction. Even now, the human heart beats faster when we are threatened, to pump more blood into our arms and legs; our breathing is quicker, the blood moves out of the stomach to protect the weakest part of the body, and adrenaline and cortisol are produced to keep us on high alert.”

The doctor paused to see whether his words were having any effect. Then he went on:

“Our problem nowadays is that we continue to perceive threatening stimuli: economic or family crises, problems at the office . . . and we still automatically activate the fight-or-flight response. It was different at the time of the cavemen, when the threatening stimuli were sporadic; but today we are continually under threat. And worse still, since the threats are psychological, we don’t have to run away or to fight with anybody. As a result, we have no physical exercise, which is vital to minimize the effects of these chemicals in our body. Quite the opposite—and this is true of practically all executives—the excessive

<sup>1</sup> H. Benson, with M. Z. Klipper, *The Relaxation Response*. New York: Avon Books, 2000, p. 47.

amount of work makes us cut out physical exercise altogether. This means that your body is constantly receiving hormones and chemicals that you fail to discharge and that overstimulates you, causing stress and all kinds of aches and pains.”

Ignacio continued to look incredulous. He kept looking at his watch.

“See here, Ignacio,” continued the doctor, “it’s as if your body were a car in neutral and you had your foot on the gas: you’re not moving, and yet you’re accelerating to the equivalent of 150 kilometers per hour. Most of us do that these days. We spend our whole lives accelerating the car in neutral every time we perceive a threat. That is why, when we want to go for a ride, we’ll find that the engine’s blown. The typical consequence of living permanently in this state is a blown engine; that is, hypertension and heart problems. The study of the Buddhist monks cited by Dr. Benson revealed that the same gland, the hypothalamus, that’s responsible for the fight-or-flight response also produces a reverse mechanism, the relaxation response, as a result of meditation.<sup>2</sup> The doctor found that when the monks entered a state of meditation, their heartbeat, their breathing, and their consumption of oxygen slowed down, and they felt a sensation of peace and tranquility. Ignacio, what you need to do is to teach your own body to eliminate the effects of stress.”

“Well, thanks a lot, Doctor,” said Ignacio. He strung together a couple of excuses and superfluous comments, and left.

The comment about meditation had been intriguing. However, Ignacio was not fully convinced. It was one of the things

<sup>2</sup> Benson with Klipper, p. 73.

that his wife, Miriam, was keen on, and that he had always considered a fraud, a kind of hobby for upper-class ladies who had time on their hands.

At home, when he told Miriam about the doctor's recommendations, she couldn't hide her enthusiasm:

"Ignacio, how wonderful that you're going to try meditation at last! It'll do you a world of good! I know of an Indian master who lives in Surquillo."

Miriam handed him a piece of paper with a name and address on it. Ignacio put it in his wallet, without showing much interest. He thought: "You needn't think I'm going to be doing the same silly things you do. I can't go around wasting my time."



A month had gone by since the heart attack and Ignacio felt fine. As far as he was concerned, his illness was over and done with. There were still problems, but . . . who didn't have problems nowadays? He had stopped drinking and smoking in excess and felt very proud of himself for doing that.

That morning, when he reached his office, the head of corporate sales told him they had lost their biggest account. The largest department store in the country was going to stop buying from them and work with their closest competitor. Ignacio began shouting at the sales officer, insulting him, and telling him it was all his fault. In the middle of his tirade, he started feeling a slight pain in his chest again. He sat down, scared, and stopped shouting. He tried to calm down, and gradually managed to get back to normal. He realized that life was sending him a last

warning, and there would be no more. If he didn't make an effort to reduce his stress, his life was on the line.

He remembered that he had the address of the guru in his wallet. He took it out, fumbling in his desperation to find it. He picked up his jacket and set off to Surquillo.

The master's house looked humble but attractive. It had white walls and a large blue door, neatly painted. Because it was clean and well maintained, it stuck out in the neighborhood like an oasis. Ignacio hesitated outside the house; he didn't know whether to knock at the door or not. What the hell was he doing standing here? He had never, in all his life, visited a fortune-teller, clairvoyant, or guru. He was a professional businessman, very rational, and he did not believe in these weird things. Still, that sensation of suffocation had frightened him; he realized that he must do something for his health before it was too late. He knocked and was let in.

On the other side of the door he found a well-tended garden with a great variety of flowers and fruit trees. Entering this house was like coming to a different world; a kind of Shangri-La in the middle of Surquillo. The house was set back from the street some 20 meters, and the garden stretched between the street entrance and the front of the house. Beside the front door of the house were six wicker chairs. Sitting there were four people, talking. They stopped talking when they saw Ignacio and looked at him as if he were a being from another planet. Ignacio felt as if he had been cut up into little pieces. "How embarrassing! Whatever must they think of me!" he said to himself. "A businessman like me . . . consulting shamans! It'll just take one of them to recognize me, or turn out to be the wife of a friend of mine, for the whole business community to find out and then I'll be the laughingstock!"



Ignacio sat at the other end of the garden. While he waited, he noticed huge ferns and a row of bonsais against one of the side walls, but what most caught his attention was the great variety of the plants—practically no two were the same. Despite the pleasant surroundings, he started imagining all kinds of catastrophes. They might come from a television channel to interview the “shaman” and he, Ignacio, would come out on all the news programs. . . . Finally, a young man approached and took him inside.

The house had a strong smell of incense. The walls were hung with pictures of half-naked individuals sitting in the lotus position. Ignacio followed his guide into a room where there was a man who looked about seventy years old, with a white beard and thick eyebrows. He was slim and brown-skinned, and was dressed in a salmon-colored tunic. He was sitting on some white cushions. On the wall behind him hung about a dozen pictures. One larger one stood out from the others: it was the photo of another man in a tunic, and he looked about a hundred years old. In other small frames there were photos of still other men with bare torsos. There were also pictures with drawings of gods of some Oriental religion. Several candles were burning on the altar.

The master silently motioned for him to sit on a cushion. Then he gazed into his eyes for a few seconds. While the master looked at him, he said nothing. Ignacio felt completely out of place. “When will this weird man start speaking? Is he dumb?” he wondered, as he silently cursed the hour it had occurred to him to come here. At last the master spoke:

“What is your name?”

“Ignacio Rodríguez.”

“What brings you here?”

“I want you to teach me to relax, what you call meditation.”

The master was silent again. He merely gazed into his eyes. Ignacio was most uncomfortable. He felt that this look went right through him. He didn’t know whether to stand up and go or sit and stay. After some minutes of silence, which seemed hours to Ignacio, the master again asked him:

“What have you come for?”

“Like I said, I want you to teach me relaxation!” Ignacio spoke louder to show that besides wasting time, he had also lost his patience.

The master remained silent a few minutes more. Ignacio felt attacked by the master’s silence. “What’s wrong with this idiot?” he thought. “Is he deaf?” He was used to action. Time was gold, and he felt he was wasting it.

Finally the man spoke again, this time as if he knew something that Ignacio was not even capable of glimpsing:

“That is not the real reason that brings you here. Tell me, Ignacio Rodríguez, why have you come if you really do not believe that I can help you?”

“That’s exactly what I was wondering myself!” replied Ignacio indignantly. “In fact I think this has been a ridiculous waste of time,” he added as he picked up his jacket. “Go on tricking rich women who believe in your every word just because you’re from India. As far as I’m concerned, you’re a charlatan.”

Ignacio strode quickly to the door of the room. When he was near the door, the master asked him softly:

“Tell me, are you happy?”

Ignacio felt those words were stabbing him in the center of his back. He suddenly felt like physically assaulting the old

man, but he kept himself under control. What right did this man have to tell him he was unhappy? On top of having to take so much aggression at work, he now had to support it here in this little cubbyhole. But now Ignacio had a strange feeling inside him. It was like when you look at someone you know but cannot remember that person's name. He felt deeply that answering that question could lead him to a destination he already knew but had forgotten how to get to. He checked his initial aggressive reaction and replied:

“Of course I’m happy! I’m a successful businessman. Naturally I have economic problems, like everyone else does, but I’m making progress. I have everything I want: my house in Lima and another one at the beach, my cars, a good wife and two children. I’ve achieved a great deal, and I have prestige in business circles.” Ignacio felt that he was answering the question with all his artillery and that the enemy was now on the ground. By speaking of his possessions, he had built great impenetrable walls around himself with all his achievements.

The master replied: “I did not ask you what you have achieved or what your possessions are. I simply asked you whether you feel happy.”

The master’s response had penetrated the walls as easily as the sea destroys a sand castle. Ignacio was disarmed. At first he was tempted to persist rationally with his point of view, but something unusual was happening to him; he felt something like an intuition, an intuition far more powerful than anything he could express with ideas. He didn’t know why, but he had the feeling that standing before that man was like recognizing himself. Then he began to see quite clearly a profound truth: he might deceive other people, but faced with that man’s question

about his happiness, he could not tell a lie. It was a fact that if he were a happy man, he would not have needed to look for help in a spiritual guide. Just then the worst thing that could possibly happen occurred: a tear started rolling down from the corner of one eye. He was overcome by a feeling he was powerless to control. He was being vulnerable before the aggressor, and yet he still considered himself the stronger of the two. A few minutes and many tears later, Ignacio finally replied:

“No. I don’t feel happy.”

Then the master spoke as if he had known Ignacio’s reply in advance:

“There was once a peasant who had a well-loved horse. One day the horse fell into a deep pit. He tried to get the horse out, every way possible, but the hole was too deep. After days of vain attempts, the peasant decided to kill the horse, to put it out of its misery. He began to throw earth into the pit to bury the horse and suffocate it. But as the man threw the earth in, the horse shook it off its body, refusing to die, and lay on top of the earth. Little by little the pit was getting filled with earth, and the horse managed to stay on top of it. Finally the horse was high enough to jump out of the hole.”

Ignacio listened to the master with interest. But he didn’t understand what the story had to do with him.

“The energy you transmit to me is the energy of fear, anguish, rage, and unhappiness,” continued the master. “I feel in you much suffering and loneliness. You are most probably going through a difficult time, like the horse in the story. You can respond to these difficulties by letting yourself be buried by your problems, worries, and difficulties. Or, like the horse, you can make use of them and take them as an opportunity to free your-

self and achieve happiness. If you have come this far, it is because you have the intuition that this is the road and that I can guide you.”

While the master spoke, Ignacio began to feel a very strange sensation of closeness. It was as if he had known this man all his life. His discomfort had turned into a feeling of confidence and warmth. The master, with the fire of his love, had melted the iron armor and the coldness surrounding him.

This was the first time in many years that Ignacio had allowed himself to show his vulnerability. He had always kept his emotions hidden. He considered that showing them was a characteristic of weak persons. Life had taught him that the only way to achieve success and avoid being used was by being tough and insensitive. Ignacio had hidden all his emotions in an interior safe-deposit box and had lost the combination many years ago. Now that the master was opening it, the emotions were flowing out desperately like doves set free from prolonged captivity. He felt as if he had met a friend he loved, a friend he had not seen for a long time: himself.

Nevertheless, his rational side came out, too. While he was sitting in the master’s room, his inner ear buzzed with messages like “This is absurd!” or “What on earth are you doing, Ignacio? React!” But for some reason that he did not understand, the charisma of the master calmed him and made him feel that he was in the right place.

“I don’t understand, Master,” Ignacio stammered, with a broken voice. “I’m supposed to be happy. I have all that I need to be happy, but the truth is—”

“Ignacio, you cannot buy happiness. And happiness cannot come from the logical or mathematical process of adding up your achievements, your goods, your relationships, or your position

in society. Happiness is felt, not thought. You have tried to be happy rationally; like wanting to enjoy the harmony of a tune just by reading the musical notes on the score, or to smell the aroma of a perfume by reading its chemical formula. The one who feels is not your mind but your spirit, and you have left your spirit aside for a long time.”

Ignacio told the master about the difficult situation he was going through in the office, and he also spoke about his heart problems. He told him that the doctor had recommended meditation as a form of relaxation.

“Your stress and anxiety are merely symptoms of a greater problem,” explained the master. “Dealing with the symptoms helps, but it does not solve the problem completely. It is like having a tank with a lot of little holes through which the water leaks and floods the floor. We can spend time sponging the water up from the floor, the symptoms, but the floor will continue to get flooded. The other possibility is to deal with the real problem by filling in the holes in the tank. Ignacio, you also have a tank of happiness, but it has many holes and your happiness leaks out from all sides. You have to learn not only to stop the leaks but also to create happiness in your life.”

“But tell me, what do I have to do?” asked Ignacio, now beginning to think that the master really could help him.

The master regarded him in silence for a few seconds and then started to look for something among his things. His hands moved as if following some kind of undecipherable melody, an internal, slow rhythm which gave the impression that every movement had been deeply studied. Ignacio, hardly aware of it himself, was watching and growing calmer by the moment. The master picked up a small wooden chest that contained some

crumpled pieces of newspaper. He carefully selected one of the pieces of paper and took a seed from it.

“In this chest I keep seven seeds of happiness. Each one of them has within it a profound lesson that will help you back onto the right road. We will start with this one.”

The master gave Ignacio the seed. He held it carefully, as if it were a newborn baby. He felt that his whole life now depended on it.

“Go and plant this seed. Come back when it starts growing and I will help you to decipher its teaching,” concluded the master.

Ignacio went home, greeted his wife and his children who were playing in the sitting room, walked through to the garden without anyone seeing him, and planted the seed. However, he decided that before believing everything the master had told him word for word, he would look up some information about meditation, and this would either boost his willingness to go ahead with it, or, on the contrary, confirm his suspicions. He took a long time on the Internet. He grew more and more astonished as he read how seriously the matter was taken. Among many other things, he found studies that showed that the persons who practice meditation reduce their oxygen consumption, reduce the secretion of stress-generating hormones, and increase their immune system. He discovered that in 1989 a magazine had published a study that analyzed senior citizens introduced to meditation. The study reported that in a short time these individuals showed significant and positive changes and finally lived longer than the control group of seniors who did not meditate. He also found an article about a Doctor Dean Ornish, who demonstrated that forty patients

with heart problems had been able to reduce the plaque of fatty deposits that was blocking their arteries by means of meditation, yoga, and a strict diet.<sup>3</sup> After two hours, Ignacio had printed up a file of data and studies that convinced him that meditation was indeed very important for health.



From then on, every day after work the first thing he did was to look at the place where he had planted the seed. He hoped to see a little magic plant that would miraculously solve all his problems. But nothing grew. Then he watered it carefully, trying to give it the exact amount of water it needed to grow. His wife, who had been watching him for several days, said:

“Ignacio, what’s happening to you? In all the years I’ve known you, I’ve never seen you water the garden before.”

Ignacio had decided not to tell anyone about the master. All his life he had laughed at his wife and any friends who believed in spiritual or esoteric things, and he was not about to give them the pleasure of finding out his secret.

“What’s happening, Honey, is that the doctor told me that the best relaxation therapy is gardening. You know . . . you’re in contact with nature and you give your mind a rest. I’ve bought some seeds to plant them to make the garden look better.”

His wife was satisfied with the explanation, and Ignacio now had an alibi to prevent anybody from asking questions about his gardening activities.

<sup>3</sup> J. Stein, “Just Say Om,” *Time*, August 4, 2003, p. 48.