

Life I've learned as

MONK KEY



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Written, illustrated & designed by
Kyle Neo Kai Fu (Kyle@kyleneo.com)

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If you've come across this book, I invite you to keep it as a gift from me — and to share it with others.

FOREWORD

I was diagnosed with cancer in May 2013. At the grand “old” age of 33, all your plans seem promising and peachy. Life feels like it’s finally taking shape: career, dreams, maybe love. But when cancer hits you, everything comes to a standstill. The world keeps moving, but your world pauses. If you had asked me a few years ago whether I would ever write a book about how to deal with cancer, I would have laughed and said, “No way.”

My grandmother died of cancer. My uncle was diagnosed with lung cancer, and by some miracle and sheer willpower, is now a survivor. Cancer has always lingered in my family’s story like a quiet shadow. I have heard enough stories from friends whose parents were diagnosed. I have cried through movies that tried to capture its reality such as *Stepmom*, *Sweet November*, *The Fault in Our Stars* and *P.S. I Love You*.

But here is the truth: nothing, absolutely nothing, can ever prepare you for cancer. No story, no movie, no memory. We live as if we are untouchable, as if tragedy only happens to other people. We plan like we have forever, and we love like there is always tomorrow.

We take so much for granted, especially the people who love us most. We assume they will always be there until suddenly we are reminded of how fragile everything really is.

This is why I am writing this book. It is not just a story. It is a will of sorts, my emotional legacy. A love letter to the people who stood by me when I was at my most vulnerable. The ones who held me together when I was falling apart. The ones who did not try to fix me but simply stayed. This is my way of saying thank you and of paying that love forward in words.

If someone out there, someone scared and confused like I once was, finds comfort in these pages, then every tear and every sentence will have been worth it. I hope my experience can be a light for anyone walking through their own storm. Whether it is cancer or some other pain, I hope this book becomes a companion to remind you: you are not alone.

And if one day I leave this world, though I pray that day is still a long way off, I do not want to be “remembered.” Because to be remembered means I am no longer here, and that thought is too heavy. Instead, I want to be felt. I want to live on in your laughter, in your quiet strength, in the way you choose kindness even when it is hard. Let my words stay with you, not as a memory, but as a presence.

Let this book be something you turn to when you are tired, when you need strength, when you need hope. Let it remind you that you already have what it takes. That you are more resilient than you think. Tough times do not last, but tough people do. I am not afraid of dying. I am more afraid of not truly living while I am still here. And here is something I have learned: cancer is more than a diagnosis. It can be any form of suffering, a heartbreak, a breakdown, a moment when your world stops. You do not have to go through cancer to understand pain.

We all hurt. We all long. We all break sometimes. So even if you have never had cancer, you might still find pieces of yourself in these words. At the end of the day, we are all the same, we eat, we cry, we laugh, we need to be loved. And because of that, we all suffer too. But we can also heal. If you look closely, you will see it: the word “can” is hidden in the middle of “cancer.” It is quiet, but it is there. Just like strength. Just like hope.

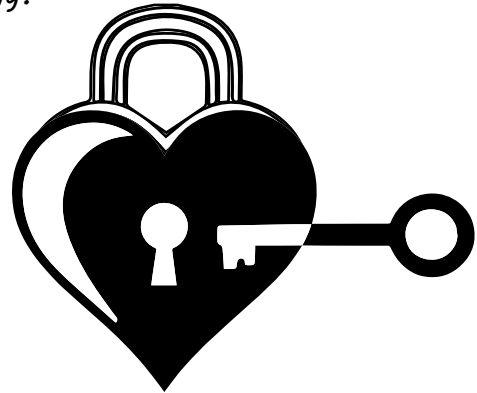
We can overcome. We can rise again. We can choose life, even when it is hard. And you, yes you, absolutely can too.

*I was given the name Key because
I was born to unlock the mystery of life.
With my Buddhist influence and as a monkey,
I see life with a realistic outlook.*

*I have learnt that some of life's lessons are
best understood through pain and suffering.*

*Who better to tame the monkey's
mind than a monkey?*

*And only when your heart is open
will life begin to unlock itself...*



WHY?

WHY?

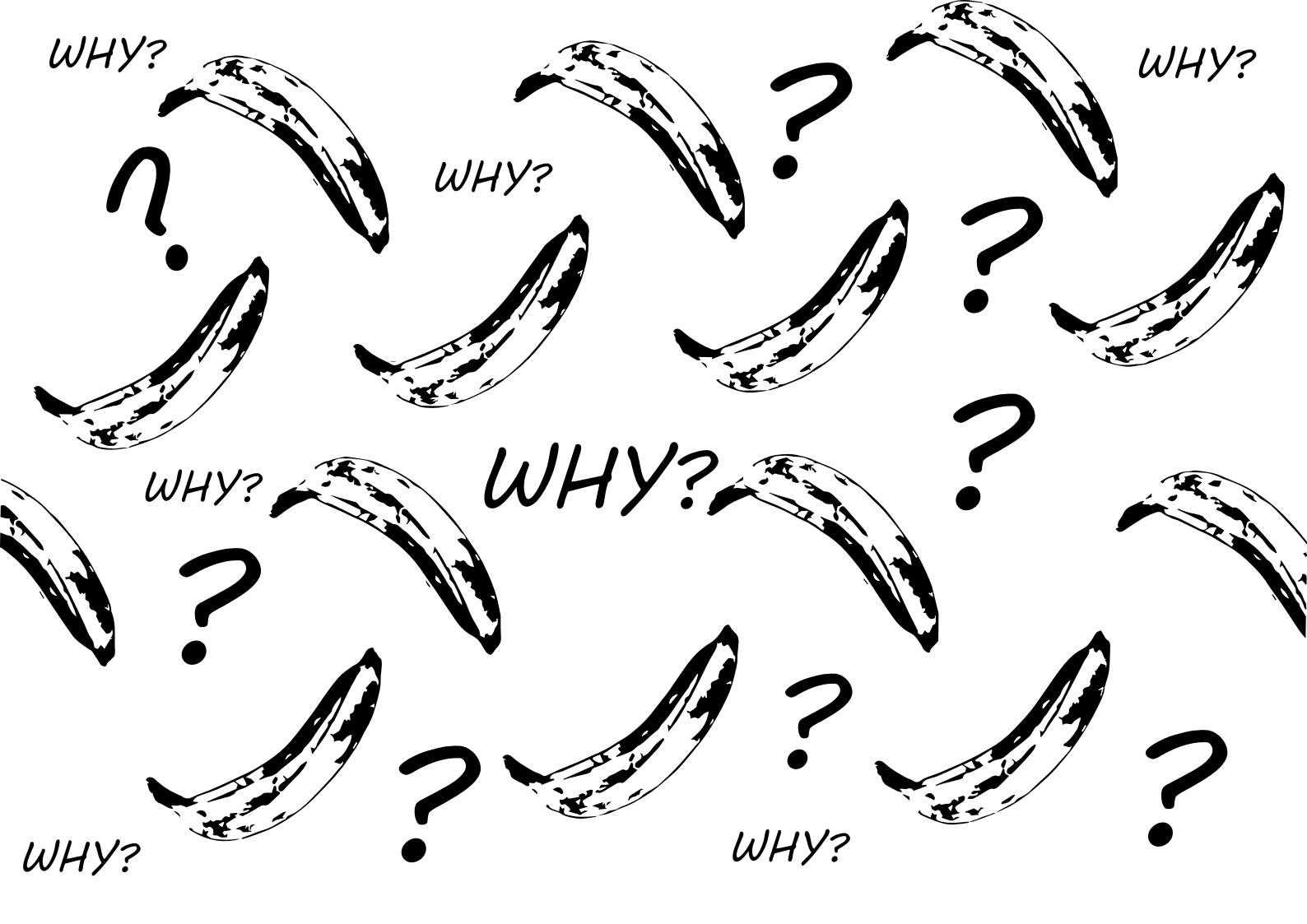
WHY?

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WHY?



WHY ME?

The first question that people usually ask is “Why? Why cancer?” as if your body could write a memo to the doctor explaining the reason. If I could answer why, I would be able to cure and prevent cancer. Unfortunately, we live in a world where people focus more on indulgences than on solutions.

We may never fully understand cancer. In fact, cancer can never truly be cured. It comes and goes, so prevention is the key. It is so complex that even a mathematician would find it difficult to solve. Perhaps we should see it another way: cancer is not something the body gets or has, it is something the body does. Like a robot, it is given parts to work with, so when some parts break down, we have to fix them. It does not mean the robot has cancer; it has a malfunction.

Although I have deduced some explicit reasons for why it happens, which I cannot reveal in this book (as that would categorize it for adult reading, and I would like to keep it PG friendly), my sister once suggested my cancer had to do with me singing too much. Genes and lifestyle can be major causes, but as a vegetarian, a nonsmoker, and someone who exercises regularly, I question whether there is truly a direct or accurate cause.

However, if we stop asking the irrelevant questions, this might be an opportunity to learn about life and how to live differently and, hopefully, more meaningfully. This might help in our recovery. If I knew the exact cause of cancer, I would have won a Nobel Prize. But for now, let us focus on asking questions that are relevant to resolving our current circumstances.

*Sometimes there are just questions
with NO answer so I choose to let it go.*



*Wrong questions give you
the wrong answers.*

It was in Clinic G that Dr. Raphael Chan, the Ear, Nose and Throat specialist, looked at me and said the words I'll never forget: Nasopharyngeal Carcinoma Cancer (NPC), Stage 3. If that were a word in Words With Friends, I'm sure I'd score sky-high. But this was no game.

Just a week earlier, I'd gone in for a consultation and a Nasopharyngeal biopsy — a procedure that involved a long, thick needle being threaded through my nose and down into my throat to take a sample from the lump. The goal was to confirm whether it was a tumor. Honestly, it was like f**king through the nose — except on this particular body part, no one could possibly find pleasure in it. Dr. Chan had already hinted there was a high chance the diagnosis would be cancer.

I was terrified, yes, but I also accepted what cancer might mean: death. Oddly enough, I was somewhat at peace with that — or at least as much as a person can be. For the past five years, I had lived life exactly the way I wanted: freelancing as a graphic designer, backpacking across continents, volunteering, giving in every way I could. I had been a son, a brother, a friend, and, I hope, a decent human being in this world. No regrets. When I was alone, tears came. But I quickly brushed them aside, thinking, What good can tears bring? Tissues, maybe.

That week before the results felt like an endless stretch of time. I used it to prepare my mind, to keep my emotions from steering the ship. Call me a control freak, but I needed to be as clear-eyed as possible. So I played out the scenarios: If I blamed someone for my illness, would the tumor disappear? If I sank into depression and obsessed over it, would it shrink?

The answer, of course, was no. Happiness, I realised, is still possible no matter the circumstances — but only

if your mind is clear enough to see how.

Apparently, this mindset of mine was showing results. When I told Dr. Chan that I was taking the news — good or bad — with a lighthearted, positive outlook, he paused and asked if I was a Buddhist. I might have given Buddhism a good name that day. But honestly, I don't think it was entirely a "Buddhist" approach. It depends on how deeply you have put the Dharma into practice. For me, it was the Dharma that gave me the clarity to understand and accept what was happening. Without my Buddhist cultivation, I could have easily lost my footing.

The Right Time

I told my friends that if I hadn't become a vegetarian five years ago, I might have gotten cancer much earlier. Studies show that diet and lifestyle do affect tumor growth. The only reason this isn't officially "proven" is because no one can patent natural food as a cure for cancer. What I mean is this: if there were ever a "right" time for me to have cancer, it would be now. Those five years of vegetarian living, of traveling and freelancing like a vagabond, of practicing Buddhism — they had mentally prepared me. I was in the best shape of my life to face this challenge.

If I hadn't met all the loving and encouraging friends during my travels and volunteer work, I wouldn't have had their strength to lean on in my darkest hours. If I hadn't connected with Buddhism, or been introduced to meditation, I wouldn't have had the tools to calm my mind. If I hadn't saved for three years to take that grand trip from Singapore to Ireland, I wouldn't have had the funds to cover my medical bills.

There are so many "if I hadn'ts." It's far easier to count blessings that way than to dwell on "if I hads." I truly