

EPISODE 189

“LW: A lot of people think I'm anti alcohol. I'm actually not anti alcohol at all. I don't really think about it all that much. What I do spend a lot of time thinking about is how can we get more awareness in our life because if you talk to anybody on the street and you ask that person, would you be interested in having an organic spiritual awakening without even really understanding what that means. I would imagine that most people would be curious or interested in that in the idea of a spiritual awakening. And so if we can do things that can facilitate more awareness, then obviously that's something that we want to learn more about. So that's why, where I like to approach this conversation it's not about not drinking or not smoking or not doing whatever, it's about how can I optimize for awareness? How can I solve for awareness?”

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:01:07] Hello friend, welcome back to the Light Watkins show. I'm Light Watkins and I have conversations with ordinary folks just like you and me who've taken extraordinary leaps of faith in the direction of their path, their purpose, or what they've identified as their mission in life.

[00:01:25] And in doing so, they've been able to positively impact and inspire the lives of many other people who've either heard about their story or who've witnessed them in action or people who've directly benefited from their work. And the goal of this podcast is to expose you, the listener to as many people as possible who have found their path and to humanize them and their journey.

[00:01:51] And after hearing story after story, hopefully, eventually, you give yourself even more permission to move further in the direction of whatever feels like your path and purpose. Because what you'll see is that anyone who does that has had to overcome many of the same obstacles and challenges and adversities that you may be dealing with right now. And when you hear that they overcame them, then you give yourself permission to overcome them as well.

[00:02:22] And so today we have a solo episode. It's just me. And I'm opening up about one of the challenges and obstacles that I chose to give myself permission to overcome many, many years ago that happened to have the biggest positive impact in my life that I never saw coming. And I would go so far as crediting that one change as being the catalyst to my personal journey towards spiritual awakening, which I also didn't really have a reference for or even language for back when I first made that choice. The change I'm referring to, of course, is when I decided to

start abstaining from drinking. And I'm using that phrasing of it very deliberately as opposed to saying the time when I became sober or the time when I gave up alcohol. And I'll explain why I'm preferring to say that I chose to abstain from drinking in this episode.

[00:03:24] And I also want to be clear, this is not an anti alcohol message. So if you drink the occasional glass of wine or whatever. I'm not going to be berating you and shaming you and trying to force you to give up your drinking. Truth be told, I'm actually quite neutral about alcohol in general, and I completely understand its place in our culture. And occasionally I partake in drinking myself and I'll explain when and where that usually happens near the end of this episode.

[00:03:57] But 99.9% of the time it never really occurs to me to have a drink. I'll share with you why. And more importantly, I'll share with you how I got to that point with alcohol where I can go long stretches of time without even thinking about it. And what has replaced drinking because this is also a crucial part of this story in this episode.

[00:04:20] The reason we indulge in alcohol which at the end of the day are neurotoxins, you know, and other substances that are more recreational that can shift our awareness or our consciousness is obviously because we get something from those experiences.

[00:04:37] And what happened in a nutshell for me is that I found that I could get the thing that I was unconsciously looking for in alcohol, I could get it in greater amounts elsewhere but without having to disconnect from my body or dull my consciousness. And I know I'm talking around it, but I obviously want to entice you to listen to the entire episode so you can hear about my journey in context and see that even for me, it wasn't a linear process where I gave up drinking and then the next week I had this major epiphany and became enlightened. That's not what happened at all.

[00:05:15] And I would argue that that's not how it works for the majority of people. Like when you see these YouTube videos where the person goes, I gave up drinking for 30 days and this is what I experienced. I don't really recommend going about it that way, even though I have a 30 day alcohol free challenge that I offer in my online community, I think that's good, but over the long term, I don't think going cold turkey is ever really the answer. I personally prefer the tortoise approach to all change in general, no matter what you're trying to improve upon, as opposed to the hare approach. And I talk about why I prefer that approach in this episode as well.

[00:05:58] But what I will say is that the concept of spiritual awakening is a real tangible thing that anyone can experience as far as I've seen, as long as you're intentional about putting the right pieces into place and that's where you want to become more mindful about what you're putting into your body, even if it's the occasional glass of wine.

[00:06:20] So again, I'm not saying this to shame anyone. It's not about feeling bad because of the wine you're drinking or the beer you're drinking. I just think it's a natural part of life looking

for ways to cope with whatever we're experiencing and taking what feels good from drinking and seeing if you can find it elsewhere, but in a way that doesn't involve any downsides or any negative side effects. And then once you discover that, maybe even within yourself, you're naturally going to have less and less of a desire to consume alcohol. And that's how I recommend weaning yourself off over the longterm; very slowly, very gradually, and also by replacing it with something even better because the need to take the edge off is still going to be there, especially in these modern times. And we want to be honest about that. You want to be honest about it.

[00:07:16] So the question is, how can I navigate this journey while satisfying my real world needs and not trying to pretend like they don't exist or even feel bad about them? Because neither of those approaches are going to be particularly helpful.

[00:07:31] So I'm excited for you to listen to this episode and I hope it provides a useful and objective perspective on what's possible when you're open to the idea that maybe there's something that can pick up where alcohol has you now and take you to even more amazing places, both inside of yourself as well as in your external life.

[00:07:54] So without further ado, let's get into this solo episode about alcohol and spiritual awakenings.

[00:08:03] Hey everybody. We are back with another solo episode with yours truly. I am super excited about today's topic. It's something that I have talked about on occasion before, and I've written about this as well in pretty much most of my books.

[00:08:22] It's about spiritual awakening. It's about the one thing in my life that I have done that has made the biggest impact. Now usually when people who are familiar with my work or with my story hear me say something like that, immediately they jump to practices like meditation or spiritual work, yoga, seva.

[00:08:49] Maybe they'll reflect back to my vegetarian days. I don't know if you knew this, but I was vegetarian for about 12 years. Vegan for much of that time. I experimented with raw food, I cut sugar for a long time. I have been working out for over 25 years. And so I've been doing a lot of really cool beneficial things that have made a significant impact on my life.

[00:09:19] But if I were to narrow it down to the one thing that has made the biggest impact on my life and on what I would characterize as my spiritual awakening, I would say that biggest thing is abstaining from alcohol.

[00:09:38] And I like that phraseology because when I reflect back to my days drinking alcohol, I never considered myself to be an alcoholic or an addict or to have any kind of problem. I never even really thought about not drinking alcohol.

[00:10:01] Nowadays with podcasts, with YouTube channels, with social media, there's so much propaganda around not drinking, and a lot of science and research is being shared around the benefits of not drinking. And usually those benefits have to do with your biology, neurotoxins and what that does to the nervous system and how that affects your sleep and how it affects your mood and all of that.

[00:10:32] I don't really have a lot to say about that aspect of not drinking because I'm honestly not as well versed in the research of it. But I am more familiar with the spiritual aspects of not drinking. And that's what I wanted to talk about today.

[00:10:51] Because some of you listening to this may or may not have any desire to stop drinking. Maybe you don't consider yourself to have any kind of problem. Maybe you only drink on occasion. And you have all of your justifications for it. And the last thing you probably want to hear is somebody trying to convince you to stop drinking because, for some people that's like Someone trying to convince them to stop walking. Like you see it as an integral part of your life. It's associated with celebration, with joyous occasions. It's associated with community and connection and all of those wonderful things, and I understand it. I completely get it. And I'm not going to try to convince you to stop drinking alcohol. To not drink an occasional glass of wine or anything like that.

[00:11:41] In fact, I have written that a lot of people think I'm anti alcohol. I'm actually not anti alcohol at all. I don't really think about it all that much. What I do spend a lot of time thinking about is how can we get more awareness in our life, right? Because if you talk to anybody on the street and you ask that person, would you be interested in having an organic spiritual awakening, right? Without even really understanding what that means. I would imagine that most people would be curious or interested in that in the idea of a spiritual awakening.

[00:12:28] Conversely, if you were to stop someone on the street or a group of people on the street randomly and say, would you be interested in having a nice time for a few hours, followed by hangover, followed by a headache, followed by depression, followed by a sleepless night? Again, some people may take you up on that, how nice of a time what we're talking about. Because it may be worth it in contrast to whatever else they're experiencing in their life. And again, these are usually people who aren't necessarily feeling like they're connected to something deeper than what they're experiencing at the surface level of life.

[00:13:10] I would hypothesize that awareness is something that most people, if not all people want more of, not less of. And experiences like depression, experiences like anxiety, experiences like sleepless nights are experiences that people want less of, not more of, in general. And so if we can do things that can facilitate more awareness, then obviously that's something that we want to learn more about.

[00:13:41] So that's why, where I like to approach this conversation it's not about not drinking or not smoking or not doing whatever, it's about how can I optimize for awareness? How can I solve my life for awareness? How can I do less and get more awareness as opposed to, trying

to numb whatever lack of awareness experiences I'm having in hopes of just being able to make it through the work week or make it through this bad situation that I'm experiencing.

[00:14:18] Now, this is all perspective. This is a perspective that I would say is relatively new for me. When I first started dabbling in abstaining from alcohol, it wasn't really about that as much. I went to college. I had many experiences of. Indulging in alcohol, that's really where I first started experiencing what it felt like to be drunk. When I grew up in Alabama, my parents were moderate drinkers. My mom loved daiquiris, my dad loved Heineken's, and so on occasion I would have a sip of my mom's daiquiri, or I would have a little sip of my dad's Heineken's. He would always send us into the kitchen to go get him a Heineken at night when he was watching TV. So when I would go there to get him the Heineken, I would take the top off and then I would take a little sip of it just to see what it tasted like. And I never really loved the taste of it necessarily, but I saw him drinking a Heineken pretty much most nights. I don't think he drinks really all that much these days, interestingly enough.

[00:15:27] But when I went to college, that's where I started drinking things like 40 ounces of beer, and just like really cheap liquor that would get you drunk very fast. So we'd do our little pregame drinking sets in whoever's house or dorm room before going out to the club or to the party. So I had a very, conventional young adult experience with alcohol; going out, getting blasted, not remembering how I got home.

[00:15:58] I still wouldn't say I had a problem necessarily. I just felt like I was just doing what people do in college. I wouldn't drink during the week usually and I would be doing my work and at my classes and whatnot, and I graduated on time and everything. But on the weekends, Friday night, Saturday night, those were definitely big drinking nights for myself and my friends. And my fraternity brothers.

[00:16:20] And so after college, that's where I got introduced to wine and more, I would say, sophisticated drinks like cocktails and martinis and scotch and soda, these kinds of drinks.

[00:16:37] I wasn't really in drinking anything cheap at that point. I was working in a restaurant, in fact. It was a higher end restaurant in New York City while I was trying to get my fashion career off the ground. And so I would recommend wine to people. There would be wine tastings and I started developing a really refined taste for different types of wine. And my buddies from the restaurant and I would go out to other restaurants and we would indulge in wine and it's always all about the wine at that point.

[00:17:08] I lived in Harlem, and Harlem was where they had that sort of renaissance back in the 1920s, 30s and 40s, the black renaissance where all the artists would gather, and of course, wine was a part of that. And so I associated it with Renaissance. I associated it with culture. I associated drinking wine with being an artist, which I felt that I was.

[00:17:30] I was doing the fashion thing during the day. But then I was also a street photographer at that time, and I was doing lots of graphic design. I was just really into design. I

would go to bookstores. I remember and just stay in bookstores for hours upon hours, looking through magazines, design magazines, photography magazines. I was that person who would carry a camera around with them. And I would hang out with photographers and artists.

[00:17:56] In fact, fun fact, there is a photo of this woman. It's categorized as a self portrait, but her name is Mfon Essien M-F-O-N-E-S-S-I-E-N. She's a Nigerian photographer and she was a very dear friend of mine. She had a mastectomy because she had breast cancer so unfortunately she passed away from breast cancer back in 2001. But prior to that, she did a series of portraits, of nude portraits displaying her mastectomy. And I was the one who was behind the camera taking those pictures, because this is before digital cameras, this is back, she had a Hasselblad I believe it's called and a tripod. And so she needed someone there to actually snap photo.

[00:18:45] Anyway, one of those photos ended up in the Brooklyn Art Museum. Bam! So I have a photo in the Brooklyn Art Museum, some photo that I actually physically took of my friend, Mfon Essien and I believe it's in their permanent collection. It'd be interesting to, if somebody could go and check it out and see if they see it and then report back and let me know. But, in any case, it was during that time that I started dabbling in vegetarianism.

[00:19:12] So, okay, quick story. As I was starting off in my modeling career, I was eating pretty much everything under the sun. In fact, most days I would be eating some sort of fast food, Wendy's, Burger King, Arby's, McDonald's, and washing it down with some kind of soda. The biggest priority for me when eating was did it taste good? That was the number one priority. Number two priority was, did it fill you up? Number three priority was, is it inexpensive? And those were the only considerations. Nutrition wasn't a consideration back when I was, 22 years old when I first started modeling. remember being in Miami in South Beach because that was like the big scene outside of major markets like New York and Chicago. And I started in Chicago.

[00:20:03] So anyway, I went to Miami, went to South Beach and. I had been, again, going to Barnes and Noble bookstores, looking through magazines, a lot of fashion magazines, and there was this one guy that would keep popping up again and again. And he and I were we were both black men, fair skin, he had very light, he had green eyes, so I kept seeing him in various editorial spreads. I found out that his name was Michael Anderson, because sometimes the spreads would have to credit the models. And so this guy became one of my idols, one of my fashion model idols.

[00:20:42] So one day I'm down in Miami and South Beach and I'm walking just, running errands and stuff. And I'm all dressed up because I'm a model and this is like my first experience as a proper model. I've got an agent and I'm going on castings. . And as I'm walking down Washington Avenue, I see this guy on a skateboard who looks very familiar and I'm getting closer to him and I recognize, oh, my God, this is Michael freaking Anderson. And I go up to him and I'm all nervous and I want to introduce myself because this is somebody whose career I've been following for a long time. And he's standing there, his skateboard is right next to him and he's just standing on the corner, just smoking a cigarette and he's got no

shirt on and he's got a great build. And he just looks very casual and very carefree. And so I'm walking up to him and I'm all nervous.

[00:21:38] And I say, excuse me, are you Michael Anderson?

[00:21:41] And he goes, yeah. And I introduced myself and tell him that I'm a model. And he's asking me a couple of questions. Oh, really? That's cool. How long have you been modeling? And this and that. And he's staring at me. And then at the end of the conversation, there's this kind of long pause. And then he says something, he takes a drag of a cigarette and then he says, you should stop eating meat. And I'm just like, taking that in, right? Because I never considered not eating meat. And I'm like, thinking to myself why is meat no good?

[00:22:13] Now, again, this is 1996. So don't look at it in today's standard where everybody and their mothers are vegetarian or vegan. Nobody was doing this back in 96, except in like probably some hippie circles in Los Angeles and places like that. We're in South beach, Miami.

[00:22:30] And so I go, okay, tell me more. And he points to my cheekbones and he says your face is holding a lot of water weight. And so if you stop eating meat, you'll, your cheekbones will come out even more. It was completely aesthetic. It had nothing to do with health, nothing to do with nutrition or anything like that.

[00:22:53] But Michael Anderson told me this, so it may as well have been Jesus Christ telling me to stop eating meat. So my mind, that meant that it was time to stop eating meat. So I started experimenting with not eating meat over those next several weeks, several months, and I noticed something really interesting. All while I was growing up, just eating whatever I wanted to eat, I would get frequent headaches. I would get frequent migraine headaches. I got them so often that my mom would give me extra strength Tylenol before I went to school because she knew that there was a strong possibility that I would get a headache that day. So in anticipation of the headache that we all knew was coming, I would take an extra strength Tylenol.

[00:23:45] When I stopped eating all the meat, I noticed that I didn't get as many headaches because I was still on the Tylenol. I was still on the Excedrin and the Tylenol and all of that during that time that I had that conversation with Michael Anderson and I thought, wow, that's really interesting. This shift in my diet has affected my biology in some way, and I never made that connection, believe it or not. And so that led to a longer term experiment of what else can I stop eating? What else may be affecting me in a negative way?

[00:24:22] And so cut to me being in New York City, I am reading all these books. These sort of traditional vegetarian books or books just about diet, the main one that I think a lot of people read before they become vegetarian, or at least back in those days they did was Diet for a New America by Tim Robbins, who was the son and the heir to the Baskin and Robbins empire, the ice cream chain. And notoriously he declined to have anything to do with selling ice cream because ice cream had dairy and dairy was an animal product and he went on this whole

journey to find out how animal products affect the body. And so that was like the gateway drug towards vegetarianism.

[00:25:12] And so that got me questioning things. I got to the point where I stopped eating meat. I stopped eating dairy. I stopped eating processed foods at one point, I stopped eating cooked foods at one point. I was just fascinated to see what effects all of that was going to have on my body. And then I would go back and reintroduce things later if I felt like the effects weren't as significant.

[00:25:38] So that's really how I started to dabble in abstaining from alcohol. I don't like calling it sobriety because, I don't know, sobriety just sounds like you had a problem and you had to be sober or something like that. But abstaining from alcohol sounds more like a choice that you're making independent of any kind of, issue or problem. I started asking myself, okay if diet has this kind of impact on my physical state, my emotional state, and my mood, then naturally, all this wine that I'm drinking may also have an impact on my physiology, maybe my neurology, etc.

[00:26:17] And I also noticed something else. And at this time, again, I'm in New York City, I'm working, I'd stopped working in the restaurant at this point because my fashion career had gotten off the ground a bit more enough for me to sustain myself. So now I'm like going on castings during the day and I started doing a little bit of DJing at night. So I was hanging out at these lounges and these bars and again, I'm like in my, my mid twenties at this point and anybody in their mid twenties, at least at that time, late nineties, you're going out all the time. You're in New York City, for Christ's sake, you're in New York City. So there's tons of things are going on, you're getting invited out all the time, parties, concerts. And I started noticing something, I started noticing that when I would go out, the first thing that I would do was I would go to a bar, meaning I would walk into the venue, and then I would make a beeline for the bar, and I would order a drink, which I If you don't really think about it, it's very common. You walk into a place, you go to the bar, you get a drink and then you go socialize and you have your drink in your hand.

[00:27:31] And at this point, I'm doing yoga and again I'm, not working at that restaurant. So I'm reading a lot of spiritual books. So the diet books dovetailed into spiritual books and I'm starting to question things and I started questioning, like, why do I do that? Why do I walk into a place? And the first thing that I do is I go to the bar and get a drink. And I started to realize that while I didn't think I had a problem, that action was some sort of coping mechanism. It was some sort of coping mechanism in order to socialize, and maybe it was just a socially acceptable way of socializing. You have a drink in your hand, you go and you get a drink. And so I very deliberately started to go to the bar and instead of ordering a glass of wine, or instead of ordering a cocktail, I would just get a cranberry juice, just to see if that changed how I socialized with people. It seems like a very small thing on the surface. But what I noticed was it didn't really change anything. So then I thought, okay, this is interesting. It's not really the alcohol per se. It's just going and getting a drink. That's the thing that I feel like I need in order to socialize. I didn't need to take the edge off. I just needed to go and get something.

[00:28:59] So again, I'm going out all the time so I can keep running this experiment. Then I run the experiment, okay I'm not even going to get cranberry juice, I'm just going to get some water. So then I would go to the bar, and I would get the water. And that didn't really change anything. I'd still go socialize, I'm holding a glass of water in my hand, I'm sipping on water. I don't even need a drink that tasted like anything. First of all, I don't need anything alcoholic, then, I didn't need a drink that tastes like anything, because I'm perfectly fine just having a little bit of water.

[00:29:27] So then, I started saying, okay what happens if I don't go and get a drink, not even water. So then I would go out and I wouldn't go to the bar, I would just go and just start socializing. And here's what I found, which is really interesting, I would find that my hands would be in my pockets fumbling around with change, or I would have my keys in my hands, my house keys in my hands, and I would just walk around with my house keys. And I realized that it wasn't even about having a beverage. It was about just having something in my hands as a way of coping with socializing. So this is getting really interesting to me at this point. And so I very deliberately started to go out and to not put my hands in my pocket, to not hold my keys and to just be there in the room with nothing, no drink, no keys, no pocket, just be there and socialize. And so I started doing that and then repeating that experiment and I found that at first I was very mindful of the fact that I wasn't holding anything, and it took me out of the moment. But then after a little while, I was able to be in the moment without holding anything. It just goes to show that we pick up these habits which we think are related to things that we need, but really they're just allowing us to cope with whatever it is that we're experiencing. And it can be more or less unconscious until we start to become more conscious with looking at it and really asking ourselves, okay, what am I getting from this experience and from every aspect of the experience?

[00:31:17] For instance, some people show up late to events and it's because they get something from that, on the surface, it just looks like they're just, always running late, but look underneath that there's something that they're getting from that experience. And it's obviously going to be different for different people. Some people may show up really early to events. They're always the first person to show up at an event. And they're getting something from that. Some people are the life of the party and they get something from that. Some people stand in the corner, they get something from that.

[00:31:47] So for me, this was just about, it was very enlightening to see what I got from ordering a drink, an alcoholic beverage and then not ordering an alcoholic beverage and then not having to get a drink at all and then looking at what I did with my hands. And at the end of the day, and most people who've stopped drinking, I think, come to this conclusion, at the end of the day when you're not really drinking and you're just fully present and you're in those spaces, which you start to realize is that it's actually not that interesting. It's not that interesting to socialize with a bunch of people who are very much whether consciously or unconsciously, in those spaces using those substances and those coping mechanisms to socialize, like socializing in those environments aren't as interesting. They became less and less interesting to me. It wasn't really a judgment about the people. It was more of an epiphany about our culture, about our society that we live in, that we've put ourselves in this situation where we put so

much emphasis on drinking and on alcohol to be the thing the go to experience whenever we're celebrating and or whenever we're mourning and or whenever we want to connect and or whenever we feel lonely there's always a reason to drink in our society.

[00:33:18] And so all of this was happening for me, about 24, 25 years ago. And so after I broke out of my conditioning in those environments, I decided that it's time to start weaning myself off of alcohol. I started doing the math and I really sat down and did the analysis and I said, okay how much money am I spending on alcohol? Because anytime you go out, you're obviously going to spend a fair amount of money if you're drinking, that's going to be the biggest part of the bill, the alcohol portion. And then I thought, okay what kind of decisions am I making when I drink alcohol? And are they the decisions that I'm most proud of? I just kind of ran that analysis and I looked at it from every conceivable angle to see what the pros and the cons were and the. The return on the investment of the amount of time and the effort and the energy and the money that I was putting into drinking and in almost every category, it came back negative. This is not actually helping me. No, I'm not saying things that I'm proud of. No, I'm not doing things that I'm proud of. Yes, it's affecting my sleep in a negative way. I'm waking up the next morning with the hangover. My whole next day is ruined. So I can't really be productive and do anything. My decision making is off, on and on. And I thought, okay this is more than enough evidence to justify weaning myself off of alcohol.

[00:34:48] But at the same time, I knew that going cold turkey was not gonna be the best approach because, we've all had that experience where you go cold turkey with something and then you do the pendulum swing back in the opposite direction. And I had such a successful time with the whole vegetarian thing. I actually went very slowly into that, weaning myself off of meat. And I thought I'd take the same approach with alcohol. I'll give myself six months. And at that point, really the only thing I was drinking was wine. And I said, I'll just drink a little bit less wine on a weekly basis. In other words, I'll restrict myself to, I don't remember the exact experiment because it's been such a long time, but it was something to the effect of I'll restrict myself to only three glasses of wine this week. And then I'll do that same thing next week and the week after that and then next month I'll go to two glasses of wine, and then the next month I'll go to one glass of wine and then after four or five months like that, then I'll stop drinking wine for a month and I'll see how I feel. And if I want to go back and have a glass of wine, I'll go back and have a glass of wine.

[00:35:55] So I started doing that. I started very gradually coming off of the wine and I think even though I budgeted six months, I think I was able to come off completely after like maybe a couple of months. I didn't actually miss it and that was also a big revelation for me because I legitimately thought that I was going to miss drinking, but I didn't miss it at all.

[00:36:19] And that experiment just continued for years. I didn't touch a drop of alcohol for years and I would go out to, I'm a big, like going out to eat person. I go out to eat all the time. Usually even today, like most of my meals I eat out honestly. And it never over those years and including today, it never occurs to me to consider drinking any kind of alcohol.

[00:36:51] There are some occasions where I've had alcohol because I just like the way that it pairs with the food and it does not cause any kind of hangover effect. There are two very specific occasions. One is when I have Ethiopian food.

[00:37:10] Now, Ethiopian happens to be my favorite cuisine. If I had a last meal, it would be Ethiopian food for some reason. I don't know, but I love Ethiopian food. I've been to, dozens of Ethiopian restaurants around the world. And in a lot of them, they have this beverage called the honey wine. And all honey wine is fermented honey. That's all it is, is fermented honey. And it's actually has a digestive component to it because Ethiopian food can be a bit hard on the stomach. And so honey wine, it just, it has this nice sweetness and Ethiopian food is very savory. So it just, it pairs really nicely. This is just me. I'm not recommending anybody go out and get honey wine or anything like that, but it's very different from traditional wine. This is my point. It's kind of thick. It's literally just fermented honey.

[00:38:01] So on occasion, I will have honey wine depending on the Ethiopian restaurant that I'm in because I just like the way it cuts the food, the savoriness of the food. I'm not going there to get a buzz or anything like that. And it never gives me a hangover and doesn't affect my sleep. And then I've been down here in Mexico City for a few years. And there's this one restaurant, it's actually one of my favorite restaurants here and really in the world. They have this daiquiri drink that has a little bit of mezcal in it which also does not give you a hangover, but the daiquiri has a bit of sweetness and the food is very spicy and savory and it just cuts it very nicely. And so those are really the only two places that I have allowed myself to have a drink that has alcohol in it. But even if those drinks didn't have alcohol, I would still get them because they're just I like the way they pair with the food. So it's a very different type of intention.

[00:39:01] But for the most part, over these last 20 something years, I don't really think about it at all. I don't look at a wine list. I'm not having to force myself not to drink or not to order anything. I actually don't like the taste of just straight alcohol. And I don't have any judgment around people who do, I just, it's just not for me. It's just not something I really think about. I'm happy just to have water or an iced tea or something like that. So tea is really my beverage, like hot tea. I love hot beverages, hot tea. I love an iced tea.

[00:39:30] And then when it came to like dating, when I had given up alcohol, it was harder for me to date women who indulged in alcohol, so I will admit that because you can taste it. When you don't drink alcohol and someone goes out and they drink, wine or whatever, and they come home and you guys are like cuddling and kissing and stuff. You can taste it in the same way that if you're with someone who smokes cigarettes and you don't smoke cigarettes, you can taste it. Kissing them is like licking an ashtray. You can taste it and it just doesn't, I don't know. It doesn't turn me on to be perfectly honest with you.

[00:40:03] So fortunately, most of the people that I dated and were in serious relationships with, they usually didn't drink alcohol as well. And then I got to see something related to that, that, oh, okay so I've established this lifestyle for myself. And in a way, I get an opportunity to set a tone for the people who are in my little circle of influence, right? I get to step into this sort of

leadership position and that was interesting because you don't realize how influential you are if you're just doing the same things that everybody else is doing. When you stop doing those things and you are confident in the choices that you're making, it's pretty interesting to see okay who else is going to be curious about this lifestyle change. You may have two or three people who are in constant contact with you who decide Light's not drinking or Jenny's not drinking or Mark's not drinking. Maybe I don't really need to drink either. I look at them. They seem to be fine. They seem to be enjoying themselves. They seem to be present. They're still out there dancing. They're still out there having a good time, but they're not needing this thing in order to be that way. And they don't have to deal with the hangover effect. They're the ones up in the morning, 6 o'clock going for the run. They're the ones who are present, and productive, and doing creative things. You have an opportunity to be a leader in that way. And that's what I realized is that, oh, I get to really step into this leadership role. Because I'm not doing what everybody else is doing around me, it starts to become this sort of natural filter where the people who aren't as curious about those kinds of lifestyle choices, they don't really invite you around much.

[00:41:54] But the people who are curious they want to come around and they want to contribute and they want to know more. And so you start to see this sort of evolution of your friend circle as a byproduct of making these kinds of, choices. So that was a pretty unexpected benefit. And so this was also around the time where I got really deep into my yoga practice and my spiritual studies. And now I'm like reading all the time and I'm going to different classes and different experiences. And people are talking about enlightenment. They're talking about Nirvana. They're talking about Samadhi and I just kept coming back for more, even though I didn't really feel like I was having tangible experiences of enlightenment or nirvana or any of that when I was practicing meditation initially in New York, where I was living. And I've talked about this, I've written about this several times, but I was the person in the room that just felt like I was staring at the back of my eyelids and nothing was really happening. But. I was also so in the moment that just being there gave me something from the experience, just being there and being curious. I got a lot from those early experiences and it kept propelling me to do more and to continue investigating into that world. And I really don't think I would have been doing that had I been still going out and drinking even on occasion, and being in the lounges. Because again, once you stop doing that, you realize that those environments aren't really giving you a whole lot. Even socializing with other people who are doing that, I will speak for myself, they weren't giving me enough to justify continuing to do that. So obviously, as a young person, especially if you want to still socialize and you want to still do things, you want to still be a part of the community.

[00:43:57] So that was what led me to these more spiritual communities. And again, I didn't feel like I was having any kind of awakening at that time. I did put a lot of emphasis on my diet and I thought, okay, for me, the diet and the yoga were the things that were allowing me to feel connected to something greater than myself, to whatever extent I was able to feel that, any kind of serendipitous moment, any kind of moment of synchronicity or deja vu or any of those kinds of experiences, I just attributed them to being a vegetarian and or not drinking and or, my yoga practice.

[00:44:37] And so my girlfriend in New York City at that time, she also started to explore vegetarian lifestyle. She also stopped drinking when she was hanging out with me. She also got into yoga. She invited me to her yoga class at her gym. Now I was going to my yoga class at my gym, which was at Equinox. I don't know if you all are familiar with Equinox is like worldwide franchise, but there was only a few in New York at that time. And this was the first one ever, the first Equinox. I used to go to that one to work out every day.

[00:45:14] And that's where I got introduced to yoga. And so I would go to yoga classes there and I had already scouted out best teachers. And she was going to her gym on the Upper East side. I was on the Upper West side. She had been to this class with this guy that she really liked. She really liked his class. She said, you have to come and take my teacher's class with me. And I was like, I look, I'm thinking to myself, I'm the one that got you into yoga, who are you to tell me what the good class is? I know what good classes are. I already have my good classes. In fact, you should probably come over to my classes more. I'm thinking this. I didn't say it because I'm not stupid. But she keeps inviting me and inviting me. And so finally I said, okay, fine. I'll come to your stupid little yoga class.

[00:45:56] And I didn't want to go because going from the Upper West Side to the Upper East Side it was a nightmare during rush hour, which is when her class would have started. Reluctantly, one day, I go to her class. I show up about five minutes late, so the class had already started. And I walk in and it's packed and there's one space in the middle of the sea of yogis and it's dark because the teacher kept the lights off. There were these sort of Christmas tree lights around the edges of the room so you could see silhouettes and he was a silhouette.

[00:46:28] And I'm now in downward facing dog next to my girlfriend and I hear this teacher counting down, inhale, exhale for one, inhale. He had this accent. I didn't know if it was British or Australian or whatever, but it was an accent. He wasn't American. And I go through the motions. I go through the whole class and actually turned out it was a very good class. I had to give her credit. She was right. It was exceptionally good class. And I left and I never went back because again, it was just so hard to get to and I had a bunch of good classes already that I was also already going to.

[00:47:04] So cut to 3 or 4 years later, she and I break up. I decide, okay, I got to get out of New York. I've been thinking about going to Los Angeles for a while because now I'm so committed to this spiritual practice, and the lifestyle that I want to go to the epicenter of spirituality in America, which at the time was Los Angeles. That's where all the vegetarian restaurants were. That's where, the Lake Shrine, Paramahansa Yogananda's Lake Shrine. He's the guy that wrote autobiography of a Yogi. That was out there and I just started a book. Gary Zukav who wrote The Seat of the Soul, he was in California, like all of these spiritual teachers were on the West coast. And so I just wanted to be out there on the West coast so that I can go full on into that. And at that point, I decided that I wanted to become a yoga teacher.

[00:47:57] And because my girlfriend and I had broken up and we've been together off and on for about four years, I just couldn't bear to be in Harlem anymore because everything that I was doing in Harlem was reminding me of her. And I was getting triggered all the time. I just had to

get out. And I relocate to Los Angeles, took a big leap of faith and I drove across country and decide I'm going to become a yoga teacher. And the first thing I do when I get to Los Angeles, I'm staying in West Hollywood. I decide, okay, let me go up to Crunch Gym, which is up around the corner on Sunset Boulevard, and let me go and see if they'll give me a pass to come and take some of their yoga classes, because like I'm a gym yogi, like that's where I started doing yoga. And this is still early days, so a lot of the people teaching yoga in the gyms were people who had been through proper, trainings, yoga trainings, because there weren't a lot of yoga studios at that time.

[00:48:56] So I go up there and I said, Hey, can I get a pass to go to your yoga classes? The guy gives me a month pass and I'm looking at it and I see this guy who's teaching at 10 o'clock the next morning. So I just decided, okay, I have nothing else to do. Let me go to this class 10 in the morning. So I go to the class, it's 10 in the morning, bright, sunny, and I'm in down dog and I hear inhale, exhale for one, inhale. That guy's voice sounds very familiar. And then I think, oh my God, that's the guy who is teaching at my ex girlfriend's gym. I've been to his class before.

[00:49:33] And so I go up to him at the end of the class and I said, hey, I think I've been to your class before. And he says, yeah, I remember you. You came to my class in New York. You came with your girlfriend. I was like, wow, that's so crazy. This was like three or four years ago. How did you remember? And he said it's because he had a crush on the girl, on my girlfriend. And when I came in, he was a bit disappointed to see that she had a boyfriend. But what's ironic is that I had just moved to Los Angeles like a month or two prior to that, and he had just moved a month or two prior to that because he had just broken up with his girlfriend in New York. And so we were both newly broken up, uh, fresh out of relationships and deeply into spiritual studies. And turned out he didn't drink either. And this is, I'm going to come back to this a little bit later, but this is a really interesting observation.

[00:50:27] So he wasn't a drinker. He wasn't a vegetarian or anything like that, but he wasn't a drinker. But we would both go to the Agape International Spiritual Center down in Culver City, which is Reverend Michael Beckwith's church, he started, he's been on my podcast, actually. It's a really good episode to listen to. We started just hanging out and he became, his name is Will. Will became my meditation buddy.

[00:50:49] Every time we would hang out, whether we were going for a hike at Runyon Canyon or going to a movie or going to dinner, we went, we shared many meals together or going to someone else's yoga class. He would always bring up the dreaded question, which was, have you meditated yet? And usually I had not because even though I consider myself to be someone who enjoys meditation, it was unenjoyable. Like the actual practice was not very enjoyable, but the idea of meditation, I liked identifying as a meditator because it was just a novel, unique thing. And I felt connected to a lot of the spiritual books that I was reading, the Autobiography of the Yogi, very heavy on meditation, Kriya was the style and I started taking those lessons out at the Lake Shrine. But it wasn't enjoyable. It employed a lot of concentration and imagination and, this kind of thing, focusing on this and that. And my friend, Will, every time we meditated, I would just peek over at him and he'd just be sitting there and he'd seem

to be having a much more enjoyable inner experience than I was having. And I just couldn't wait for the time to pass. There were rarely occasions where I didn't rejoice when the time came to its conclusion and I got to come out.

[00:52:05] But I got to say I meditated and that was great. And so anyway, long story long. Will, many months later, introduced me to the man who became my meditation teacher and then that set me off. That's when I had my first legitimate experiences with, deep and profound meditation and felt like something was happening, and I got why he was enjoying meditation so much because it legitimately became an enjoyable experience. And I really don't think you can appreciate that until you have the experience because you're probably thinking to yourself, yeah, sure but I have a monkey mind or have this. I'm telling you, none of that matters. The monkey mind. I had the monkiest of monkey minds and the ansias of bodies. And when I learned from my teacher, that changed my entire relationship with meditation.

[00:52:54] And I've of course written a lot about, some of those principles I written about bottom and Bliss More. That's my how to meditate book, Bliss More: How to Succeed in Meditation Without Really Trying. So that's one I would highly recommend if you're interested in learning about those principles. And I've also written about it in Travel Light, my most recent book, on spiritual minimalism and because what I realized was that it was like the minimalist approach to meditation, but what this story illustrates for me is that abstaining from alcohol when I did in my mid to late twenties was the catalyst for me, giving myself permission to explore these other areas of life that I found very intriguing, such as the spiritual stuff, such as the yoga and eventually the meditation, and then the leap of faith from New York to Los Angeles, and the desire to become a yoga teacher, which then led me to Crunch Gym, which then led me to my friend Will's class, which then ultimately led me to the guy who became my meditation teacher, which then led to the more tangible spiritual awakening, right? Meaning the byproduct of a sum total of experiences.

[00:54:21] I think I did, the calculations one day to see how many times have I actually meditated in my life? I just passed my 21st anniversary of meeting my teacher recently. And I think I calculated I had done 15,330 meditations times 20 minutes equals 300,000 divided by 60 minutes equals so that's 5,000 hours of meditation, okay? Divided by 24. So that's about a total of 212 straight days sitting in meditation over the last, that's almost like it's more than half a year sitting in meditation constantly 24 hours a day, no sleep, no food, nothing.

[00:55:08] But I would say the spiritual awakening is the byproduct of the sum total of those experiences. And now what is a spiritual awakening? It's awakening to your true nature, it's awakening to the reality of who you, who and what you truly are. Because most people would identify as the facts of their life. If you were to stop the average person on the street and say, who are you? Tell me about you. Who are you? They would start thinking in terms of, okay I am a nurse, my name is Sarah, I'm from Minnesota, and they would start going, I have three sisters, they start going through the facts of their life. No one or very few people would ever say I'm light being expressed as a human in this particular lifetime, but I'm actually spirit and, this kind of thing. Thing. And obviously, I wouldn't say that either, but it's not really a matter of who you think you are. The real question is, who do you feel that you are?

[00:56:09] Do you feel who and what you are is greater than the facts of your life? Do you feel connected? To other people and to the moment that you're in right now, so much so that you're not giving as much weight to your future worries or your past regrets. It's easy to say this stuff, and think about it intellectually. Yes. No, I don't think about the future. Yes. No, I don't care what other people think. But do you feel that deep down inside or are you having to convince yourself of that? And furthermore, do your actions, your day to day, moment to moment actions reflect that, that you are truly in this moment? Or do your actions reflect that you're always preparing yourself for some fear in the future, something that has not happened, and you spend exorbitant amount of time thinking about that and less time appreciating what's happening in and around you right now.

[00:57:15] So when I talk about concepts like enlightenment or like spiritual awakening, I like to bring them out of the clouds, bring them down to the ground and relate them to kitchen table issues, because if you can't relate to them in a practical, accessible way, then what's the point of even considering them?

[00:57:36] A lot of times when we contemplate spiritual work, we see it as completely separate from our day to day life. There's spiritual work and then there's washing the dishes, there's spiritual work and then there's making the bed, there's spiritual work and then it's taking a shower.

[00:57:51] But what if they were all intertwined? And what if you were engaging in your spiritual work to the extent that you were present while you're washing the dishes, while you're making the bed, while you're taking a shower, while you're in conversation with people, right? In other words, the degree to which you are present is the degree to which you are experiencing your spiritual work.

[00:58:19] And this has all kinds of ramifications because that spiritual work allows you to be more connected to what I write about in travel light, which is your heart voice is like your internal GPS system, which is just like the GPS in your phone or in your car is giving you prompts. Go up here, 300 feet, make a right, go down, 100 feet, make a left. What is it doing? It's navigating us to our predetermined destination. And so from a spiritual perspective, we have a purpose that has been predetermined within our spiritual DNA. And I'm not talking about some overarching purpose where you're meant to be, the next. Gandhi or Mother Teresa or somebody like that, but a purpose for this season of your life and or a purpose for this week and or a purpose for this day, right? You are on purpose. Which means in any given situation, whether you're in a bar, whether you're in a synagogue, whether you're in a car driving, you have some direction that you're heading in. In other words, you're getting something from the experience. You're getting something. If you're driving in a car, you're thinking to yourself, okay, I'm going to this destination. Maybe you're driving to work, maybe you're driving to school. What are you getting from that situation of going to work? You're getting, on a broader scale, you're getting a livelihood. You're getting a way to support yourself. You're getting a way to provide for your family. You're getting a way to maybe show off your status. You're getting a way to have power and influence in some way. But you're getting something from the experience. And if you're in a bar, maybe that's your opportunity to meet people, to meet

potential partners, to not be alone, to have some sort of connection. So you're getting something from that. You're engaging in alcohol. You're taking the "edge" off. You're getting something from that, et cetera.

[01:00:22] So spiritual work, also, you get something from that. You're getting something from everything. And what I found that I was getting from my own spiritual work, that was funding my spiritual awakening was, I was getting a greater and greater sense of fulfillment. And fulfillment means you're able to be more present because you're not looking for whatever's going to happen in the future to fill you up more than you're able to be in the moment. So as a byproduct of getting more fulfillment, it allows you to be more present to whatever is happening in around you, which means you can now hear your inner guidance, your inner GPS a lot more clearly. You have a stronger connection to your heart voice. And there's a thousand other voices in there, right? That don't necessarily go away when you start to feel more connected to your heart voice. They just fade in the background. So they're more in the background as opposed to being in the foreground and the heart voices in the background. And when that's the case, then the heart voice is usually referred to as a still, small voice. You can barely hear it. And that's when you have to go and sit on a meditation cushion. You have to sit in a quiet room in order to detect. What's happening in the heart voice, or you hear it in the shower. Or you hear it, in some situation where you're connected to nature. You're not distracting yourself, and that's usually when the heart voice is most prominent. But it's still very subtle.

[01:01:46] As you practice your meditation and you do your spiritual work, you become more spiritually awakened. You have a stronger connection, which means it gets louder so it can actually penetrate the noise that is coming from the other voices. The voice of social conditioning, the voices of your teachers and your parents and of your neighbors and of your social media echo chamber and of the news and all of those other voices that are also having a pretty massive impact in who and what you identify as and how you move through your life.

[01:02:23] You're being guided either by your internal GPS or you're being guided by social cues, but either way you're being guided. And so being spiritually awake and aware means that you're starting to reconnect to that internal GPS. And I would make the argument that it's very difficult to do this if you are under the influence of alcohol and I go a lot deeper into this in in travel light. And I talk about how if there is a polar state to spiritual minimalism, which is like the internal cleansing of those other voices. So you can be more connected to your heart voice. I said, there is a polar opposite state to that.

[01:03:08] It would be the state of inebriation. And again, it's not about being anti alcohol. It's about just what can I do in this moment to increase awareness, to turn the volume up on awareness?

[01:03:21] Here's the thing. The experiment that I asked people to run in that book is to see if you can go three months without any sort of alcohol, just temporary abstaining from alcohol.

[01:03:33] And if upon hearing that, three months, three months, I can't go three months. That's too long. Then you have hard evidence that the loudest voice in your awareness is not your heart voice. Because your heart voice Would never try to justify being disconnected in order to indulge in substances again. We're not talking about forever. We're just saying 3 months. So then the question that you want to ask yourself is if that other voice.

[01:04:06] Is defending your use of let's just call it what it is awareness dimming substances and it's defending it so strongly then what else is it influencing you to do or not to do, what else are you getting from listening to that voice because if it can easily sway you to reject the suggestion of going a few months without alcohol, then it's very likely that it's also, so It's also swaying you to block your potential and other areas of your life.

[01:04:42] It's easy to justify, not giving it up because again, it's so prevalent in our society. And most people would indeed find it pretty impossible to abstain, but that's where we get into this whole idea of functional alcoholic, because that's what an alcoholic is someone who cannot go without alcohol , and we've normalized this in our culture, right? It's just called, I just a drink every now and again. But we'll say, oh, I can stop anytime I want, but can you really stop anytime you want, right? So that's what the experiment does. It just it gives you confidence that actually yes I can stop anytime I want

[01:05:21] and so that's why I recommend three months. Three months is a good amount of time. Anybody can do one month, I did dry January fantastic, but if you go three months without any alcohol Then you are not probably a functional alcoholic, A, and B, you give yourself an opportunity to connect to your internal GPS.

[01:05:42] And then after three months, if you want to go back and have a little, drink here and there, at least you gave yourself a chance to establish a stronger connection. And you may realize, like I did after three months, that you don't really need it in order to live your life, or in order to enjoy your life, or in order to be your most authentic self, or in order to have fun or to feel connected. You can be grateful, you can be present, you can have access to your heart voice, and you may realize that's way more valuable to me than whatever I was getting from drinking. So here's my challenge that I want to leave you with, okay? If after listening to all of this, you're saying to yourself that the idea of establishing a stronger connection to my internal GPS intrigues me, then I would strongly suggest that you start abstaining from alcohol and recreational drugs for as long as you can with the intention of working up to three months.

[01:06:45] And look, maybe you only get a week. Before you have a drink, and that's fine. You give yourself permission to have that drink. Okay, and all you're going to do is start over and see if you can make it to two weeks. The next time I'm a big fan of the tortoise approach, not into the pendulum thing. Okay. And you just keep starting over and extending the time until you make it to 3 months in a row.

[01:07:08] So that means that this experiment may take a year. It may take 2 years. But at least now you're being intentional about it and you're just continuing to stretch it out bit by bit over

time. And who knows, you may end up looking back over these last year, a couple of years, 2026 or whatever, looking back and saying, you know what, these last couple of years were my most transformative years of my life.

[01:07:37] And and that's how it usually goes, right? You're not going to get some big epiphany the day you stop drinking or the day you start abstaining from alcohol. But once you start to accumulate a body of work of what it feels like to take the pro awareness approach to life, because that's what you're displacing it with, is awareness, hopefully.

[01:08:02] Then you won't even really consider going back and the benefit you used to get from the alcohol, it just doesn't really, it doesn't hold a candle to the benefit you get from building up that body of work of being more and more spiritually awake and spiritually And it's not something that you even have to convince yourself of.

[01:08:29] It's just, it just becomes a part of your new day to day reality.

[01:08:34] So that's it. Just wanted to share that experience with you and I hope you enjoyed it. And I'll keep dropping these solo episodes on occasion and telling stories for my life. And and thanks for sticking with this episode this long. Hopefully, it inspires you to experiment with what it takes to become more spiritually awake and spiritually aware.

[01:09:01] Hopefully, it inspires you to do things a little bit differently on a more consistent basis.

[END]

[01:09:07] Thank you for tuning into my solo episode. If you want to know more about my perspective on abstaining from alcohol, I wrote a whole section about it in my latest book called *Travel Light*, which is about the principles of spiritual minimalism.

[01:09:24] And of course, I'll put links to everything that I mentioned during the episode in the show notes, which you can find at lightwatkins.com/podcast. And if you enjoyed this deep dive into abstaining from alcohol and you found it inspiring enough to consider taking the next step, I have an alcohol free challenge in my online community called 33 Alcohol-Free which is a 33 day challenge of reducing your consumption of alcohol. And not only does it provide you with instructions and accountability, but it also gives you access to my seven day meditation kickstart, which will help you with your meditation practice and you'll also get to join live weekly meditations with me for additional support. And the best part about it is you pay a small accountability fee, and once you make it to the end of the 33 days successfully, you'll be credited back your accountability fee and you can use it for some other challenge in the community. So there's literally nothing to lose and everything to gain with this challenge.

[01:10:31] Alright, I hopefully we'll see you back here next week with another story about someone just like me, just like you taking a leap of faith in the direction of their purpose. And

until then, keep trusting your intuition, keep following your heart, keep taking those leaps of faith. And if no one's told you recently that they believe in you I believe in you. I know you can do it. Thank you so much. Sending you lots of love and have a great day.