



THE WAY TO MYSELF

————— ANDREY ALEKSEEV —————

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The Way to myself

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Аннотация

The name of famous Novosibirsk entrepreneur Andrey Alekseev can be linked to such massive and successful projects as nationwide restaurant chain called “Vilka-Lozhka” and “Pechki-Lavochki”, as well as the “Bolshaya Medveditsa” shopping center. Some would ask: what else does that guy need? In this book, Andrey Alekseev tells about how you can find your own Way and follow it. He shares his experience of breaking bad habits, changing his attitude towards himself and towards people and business. Do you dream of finding more opportunities to realize your talents and become a well-known professional? Then this book is for you! Enjoy your trip!

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To the Reader

Dear reader,

Before you read the first page and start your journey following the steps of the authors, make some hot tea, forget your worries, and feel the flow of life, as we did while writing this book.

I lived as a businessman for 20 years. That was a time dedicated to gathering valuable experience in life and entrepreneurship. I created my business projects one after another, they grew fast and became successful. I studied a lot during those years, and I learned a huge number of diverse skills. The thought about sharing my knowledge in a practical book for beginners in business has always touched some strings of my soul, but every time I was about to start writing such a book, I couldn't do anything, and started doing something else. I had no wish of forcing myself to do that. Therefore, I left that idea behind again and again.

As soon as my life started changing fast, I started a long journey full of obscurity – the Way to myself. I found out that the concept of “I am a businessman” stopped being the key description of my life. Today it's just one of my social roles, instead of being the meaning of my life, or a measure of how successful it is. My true inner being, the one who I really am, is much more expansive than a standard definition like “Andrey Alekseev, a businessman, a son, a husband, a father, a friend,

etc...” It’s more like an amazing feeling that, “I am the master of my life”.

While studying myself, I had to go through really diverse experiences that were sometimes pretty tough. I moved towards obscurity through my own fears and limitations. Often, I went nowhere. Despite this, my wish to learn about my true “me” and my real being was so strong, that there were no obstacles (neither inner nor outer ones), which could stop me continuing on my path.

Once I asked my Teacher – a person, who helped me on my path to learn about myself, what would he suggest to me I do, what should my next step on the Way to myself be?

I thought, a new meditation practice, or a mind cleansing technique would be shown to me... “Go on and write a book!” the Teacher said. Frankly speaking, that was a very strange answer to me. I understood I didn’t know how I would go about doing that. What could I tell others? What could I share with them?

As time passed by, I did lots of different things, and the idea about a book seemed to be dissolved somewhere in the depth of my mind. That happened until Anna, a friend of mine, said that there was a person in our surrounding, who was interested in writing a book about a personal experience of deep inner changes. I decided to give it a chance and see what would happen, and if anything would happen at all. I met Lada Vilisova. We discussed the idea, and let it go for a while to let it get ripe.

Later on, while thinking about my future book, I realized I didn't want to imagine anything. I thought to myself, "Let the book be born as naturally as children do. Let everything happen on its own. Let it be written and concluded on its own, naturally and harmoniously." Even though I still hadn't had any ideas on what a book writer should do, and how it happens usually, I said to Lada, "I'm open for any questions which would interest you. I will be honest about my thoughts, my words, and the experience I'm going to share." That's how we started our work, from the point of absolute obscurity regarding what result would come out of it.

Gradually, moving from question to answer, from one topic to another, our new book got its own character, inner links, and specific image system. The book was being born and growing like a child.

And of course, at that moment we didn't think about our target audience, we didn't consider positioning, nor did we develop any marketing strategies. We lived and wrote being in the flow of the Present, did our business, and stayed ourselves.

This book was not imagined, but it was lived through. It represents the inner experience I received during the years of my life. It is truthful in each word. This book is about the personal experience of a man, who used to ask himself the same questions about the IMPORTANT THINGS, as each of you does. It is about how he looked for, found, or invented his own answers. It is about where he has reached in the end, what supported him

on his way, which obstacles he faced, and what it all led him to. One chapter of “Way to myself” can be described as “quotidian”, another one helps to get over the routine, and take a look at your life from the height of a Divine perspective.

This book doesn't contain any unexpected plot twists, or fictional scenes – the only thing you can find here are some simple answers to difficult questions.

Whom is this book for? For those, who are on their Way of finding themselves, the Way, which is harmonious for their souls. Those people who seek, doubt, who don't always feel ready to share their doubts, or just don't know whom to speak with about the things which make them worried. At that actual stage, they need something more than certain instructions, or to learn about meditation, practices, lifestyle... Those people want to understand how they can find their own Way in the real world. They need a place of support. They need to believe that spiritual research, self-development, and material and emotional wealth are all possible to achieve for anybody, and that there are some people who have already managed to change their lives for the better.

I'm one of you, my dear readers. A person, who made his way on the road of research, losses, insights, mistakes, and finally found his own Way.

You can do that as well! You will.

Good luck on your Way to yourself!

Chapter 1. Finding myself

In my childhood, I used to be a really active and stubborn kid. My mom said that while she and my father were walking from the bus stop to our home, I could dash there and back several times.

From my very childhood, I felt as though there was a kind of flame inside me, and that flame forced me forward. At school I was very much into volleyball. I trained twice a day for 7 years in a row. I made my way through to the Russian National team. And that's as far as my career in sports went.

Overall, as far as I can remember, I've always tried to achieve the maximum in whatever I did. I threw myself into those activities, and did my absolute best. However, I always managed to find a new interest as soon as I understood that the previous one was exhausted.

Pretty early, still as a school student, I read Theodore Dreiser's Trilogy of desire: "The Financier. The Titan. The Stoic". The life of the protagonist was so inspiring for me, that I decided immediately: "I'll be a businessman!" And at that time, it was not about money. Not at all.

I WANTED TO CREATE, DESIGN SOMETHING GRANDIOSE. BUSINESS LOOKED LIKE AN EXTREMELY INTERESTING GAME.

After high school, I passed my university exams. At the same time, me and my friend Nikolay started working over

setting up our very first business. And we worked a lot. One company, which sold alcohol, offered for us to become their sales representatives (as it's called nowadays): to buy their products at wholesale prices, and sell them at retail. Me and my friend (being about 17–18 years old), rented a place at the market – and started bringing alcohol to sell. Then, in 1991, there was nothing like market economy in Russia yet. There even was a joke: “If you stick a rod in the soil, it will be blooming soon (meant produce a profit)”.

The business went well. At first, we used to bring the products in a little cart. Then – by minivans. And finally (pretty fast, actually), by railway carriages. So, by the time we started our university studies, we had earned enough to buy a 3-bedroom apartment, and 3 cars. We only bought those things as a way to invest our money.

I was a student, but my heart was won over by business so much that it became absolutely clear: it was what I wanted and would do. In the mornings I studied at the University, in the afternoons – sold alcohol. And that's how it was everyday: the market, alcohol, and a huge income (for those days)... We, two young guys, gained so much money that I couldn't lift the bag with daily earnings alone. We took bags of cash to Moscow, and bought railway carriages of products to deliver to Novosibirsk. By the time we arrived back home – we already had lots of people in line to purchase what we brought.

In the end, I couldn't understand why would I need a university

education at all. I was in my freshman year – and I came to the lectures driving my own car. Lots of beautiful girls surrounded me. We spent both time and money for our own entertainment, for our own pleasure. We enjoyed our lives... I felt I was free and almighty!

Those days, business was my major interest, and in business the most important thing was gaining more money, as wealth was exactly the thing giving me that feeling of freedom and might. What's more (and I got that pretty fast), everyone around me loved money very much. Wherever you come go – everybody's happy about that. "Wow!" – I thought, – "What a good guy I am! And life's great when you have some money in your pocket!"

A year passed that way. And the second year passed as well... It felt as if it was raining money. Soon I found some personal traits I never felt I had before: egotism, greed, irritability. I was absolutely crazy about one and only one thought: "How do I make more money, faster, – and easier?" It was not life, but a game we played with cash instead of points. "Who got more points? Who's a better player?" Those were the questions we asked when measuring ourselves, others, – and life in general...

Time went by. Me and my partner became wealthier. The flywheel of time moved faster. One day, we reached the limits of our greed, and the next thought that came to our minds was: "Why should we travel around the country, work by ourselves, when we can invest our money into a popular financial pyramid called MMM?"

At first, we tried with just a bit – and earned a bit. We liked it. “So, why don’t we just invest a lot of money into MMM, and earn a fortune fast and with no effort at all? It’s just important to get money on time – and that’s what we are good at.” – We thought. And we did it that way. Well, we didn’t put the cars and apartments as collateral, but we invested all the cash we had to the very last cent. And as soon as we did so – the pyramid was ruined, as if destiny had just been waiting for our money to destroy the scheme.

In just a couple of days, the pyramid was demolished. We didn’t even manage to get our money back, let alone any profit. We lost everything we had those days. I still remember that awkward feeling of emptiness: One day I was a Richie Rich, and the next – Poof! – nothing’s left. I didn’t have two pennies to rub together!

After such a negative experience for both of us, me and my partner decided to finish sharing our business and go our separate ways.

LATER ON I UNDERSTOOD: IF YOUR ONLY GOAL IS ABOUT MAKING MONEY – YOU WILL NEVER GET THERE. THIS MONEY WILL FLOOD IN FAST – AND FLOOD OUT EVEN FASTER. IN SUCH CASE LOSSES ARE SOMETHING NATURAL AND EVERYTHING GOES ACCORDINGLY.

After some time (about a dozen years) – I changed my point of view about the world, and understood another truth: whatever

you do, it comes back to you. Money raised by destruction, will come back and destroy your life one day.

What did we found our business on? We sold alcohol and cigarettes to people. In other words, we poisoned and ruined their lives. And our lives as well: that was the time, when I started smoking and drinking.

You become what you do. I am where my attention is. Later on, this truth confirmed itself in many other things I did. Working in public catering, I gained some weight that I just couldn't lose.

After establishing a shopping mall for building and construction supplies, a building boom started in my life. That was the time when I got the desire to build a house for my family. The time of major renovations of apartments, offices, and businesses started.

Vice versa it works as well: if your lifestyle and sphere of interests has changed – you'd better look for a new type of activity, which can help you achieve the next level of self-development. Otherwise, your old business will pull you back towards your past to the habits and values you've already decided to get rid of.

However, I understood that much later. Those days there was only one question which occupied my mind: "Why? Why did that all happen? Why did that happen to us? What should we do next? Do I actually want to do anything at all now?" I lived in that state of mind for almost a year. I didn't work – and did nothing. I tried

to recover and understand how I should live and what I should do.

One day I met a famous Siberian businessman Igor, who was a major banker and an investor. I had an idea of setting up “Grill-Master” – the first fast-food restaurant in Siberia. And he had a suitable place. We bought a franchise and started a brand-new project. And again, people started staying in line to visit us just a few days after opening.

That was an extremely successful project, the first of its kind, outcompeting all other Novosibirsk restaurants at that time, in terms of popularity.

It looks as if everybody in the city visited us: wealthy and not, intellectuals and workers, young and old. Just imagine: people brought their families to our café for a common lunch!

Working on that project was a pleasure. We had a great staff, the place was in a great location. So, our expenses were soon paid off. I understood that I found a good and interesting business. We opened new places of different types, and they immediately became popular and profitable.

Those were the days I felt I was a creator: I always wanted to imagine something new, design business solutions, experiment with different formats. Business became not only a source of income for me, but also a source of art, interesting ideas, communication, and a means to create new, bright, and widescale projects...

That’s how “Vilka-Lozhka”, “Zhili-Byli” (“Pechki-Lavochki” now), “Etno”, “Boulevard”, “Macaroni” and a dozen of other

food service establishments were born. There were more and more restaurants in the city, our ideas were being developed, replicated, and prosperous. I liked this kind of life: an interesting and creative business, high income, and an ability to live the familiar free life of a successful young man. Entertainment, pleasure, clubs, trips... I started travelling abroad and visited different countries. Our business went really well.

Simultaneously, I decided that it was high time to develop a management system, and went to Moscow – to study for an MBA degree and learn the modern craft of management. I had an idea to stop being an entrepreneur, and become a professional manager, who would be able to lead any business in the “right” way, however large it was.

Of course, the first thing that happened to our business was an expansion of our staff. While, de facto, we had almost no managers beforehand, and everything swam with the flow, now there was a huge interlayer between me and the business: marketing and management, many specialists in “this” and experts in “that”...

My personal time and attention span were too little to manage everything established yet. The administrative pie grew wider and higher, bringing nothing new to our business. On one hand, there was a feeling that a company with management is “right”, and everything was going as it should go. On the other hand, I understood that the company was dying down in front of my eyes. I was losing my influence. I was losing the feeling of the

company – and drowning in the flow of bureaucracy! There was a fog of paperwork, separating me from real people and my own feelings of a developing business.

I continued supporting the “system” as a habit, but I didn’t understand why we need these plans, coordination chains, multilayer departments, and tons of reports. I didn’t even look through them!

Multiple instructions, internal orders and regulations, made a group of adherents turn into a bunch of obedient doers. Releasing the staff from their responsibilities regarding “what” and “how” they should do their jobs, I fully put all of them on myself.

At the same time, the flywheel of bureaucracy was moving faster, and the net expanded. 30, 40, and later 60 companies in 10 regions of the country. I stopped visiting the restaurants’ openings and started living my own life, while the business lived its own. I didn’t see our clients and guests, but only my managers’ reports. I became a little part of a huge managerial machine, and I didn’t own the business any more – it owned me. Moreover, the service quality and profitability were decreasing.

Once I went into one of our restaurants as a common visitor and sat at a table counting on a waiter to come. By the way, he was close by, but he didn’t hurry at all. Then I came to him asking: “Why don’t you serve me?” The answer was brief: “That’s not my table”.

At that very moment I understood, what my business had turned into. Our employees, who used to be part of a close-knit

highly qualified team before, didn't care anymore about whether or not our clients were served well. That young man didn't see me as a guest, but just as a part of the interior, which he categorized as "my table – not my table".

THAT WAS THE MOMENT WHEN I FIRST THOUGHT THAT AFTER BECOMING A SLAVE OF THE MACHINE I HAD MADE MYSELF, I STOPPED LOVING – PEOPLE, BUSINESS, AND THE WORLD.

That's when I felt that I was losing myself. Just like a hamster, which eternally spins its wheel and can never get off. If at one time I saw the business as a source of joy, inspiration and energy, now it was just making me desolate.

Why?

The huge effort put into the business, brought nothing but exhaustion. Everything I did lost its liveliness, leaving pure mechanics.

Year by year, my life looked wealthier, and I had more opportunities to enjoy it. However, I felt worse and worse emotionally. Meeting friends and experiencing some lighter emotions, which can be bought for money, helped me avoid depression.

However, the tiredness was accumulated, while joy and love gradually went away. One day I understood that I'd lost the easygoing spirit which was natural to me. The deal I had didn't cheer me up. The weariness of life reached the peak, and I wanted nothing: no business, no money, no love, no new ideas or projects...

Nothing I possessed encouraged me to feel the passion and the taste for life. I had to always seek for – and come up with some new sources of joy, inspiration, and reasons to live.

I STARTED ASKING MYSELF: WHO AM I AT ALL? WHY DOES THE WORLD NEED ME? DOES IT ACTUALLY NEED ME, AND DO I NEED IT? WHY WAS I BORN AND WHAT SHOULD I DO? I DIDN'T HAVE ANY ANSWERS, BUT I HAD A FEELING THAT I COULDN'T LIVE THE WAY I DID ANYMORE.

So, I found a way to change everything. “I guess, I should get married! I’ll get married and everything will improve. A family will fill my life with new meaning, and change its quality. I will settle down, calm down, and I will feel better”.

By the way, I noticed that as soon as I set an inner goal for myself, everything seems to happen without much effort. For example, that’s the way important people come into my life: we meet and get to know each other by chance, I don’t go out of my way to make this happen. And the opposite is true: usually, nothing goes well with the people I look for.

And in the same way, by chance, I met my future wife Marina. We became friends, and we had a wonderful relationship which developed easily and naturally. I liked giving my attention to her, flirting, taking care of her. So, I was absolutely sure that: first, I must get married; second, it must be with Marina.

After half a year since our meeting, I made a proposal. And three months later we got married. I got a new role: I became a husband. We found some new activities to do together, some mutual rights and duties. Our leisure time became totally different.

Once I was travelling by bus, when my phone rang. Marina told me we were going to have a baby. My first child! It’s really difficult to describe my feelings at that time: joy, surprise, perplexity, responsibility, tenderness... Something new was about to come into my life.

By the way, that was the moment when I decided to quit

smoking. And I've never smoked since then. Because I was going to have a baby. What would she think of her father? What example would I be giving her?

As soon as Marina appeared in my life, we built a family and gave birth to our baby, a new period in my life had started. A new kind of energy came into it. Many things changed in my mind as well: I started living not only concerned with myself, but others as well. I became responsible for my family. Gradually, my interests changed too.

Many things were changing. But not my habit of having a free, independent life style, or taste for bachelor parties with friends and entertainment. I couldn't leave that behind, neither did I want to do so.

That way a year passed and another one did... I was an adult married man. I worked on my family and my business, which was growing rapidly and required a lot of my attention. I thought of my business as my child, which I fed and helped grow for many years. And everything that happened to it affected me a lot.

More frequently the same dreadful thoughts came to my mind. "I devoted myself to my business till the very end. I established lots of successful projects. And where is my joy, calmness, satisfaction for everything I've done? When will this rat race finish? Why don't I control my business, instead of it controlling me?"

There were no answers so far. I still didn't understand, who I was and what I was here for. I felt as if I was driving staring at the

gauges, without seeing the road, moving almost as a blind man.

Meanwhile the number of restaurants increased. One moment, I felt bored with replicating my restaurants, and working in public catering business altogether. And the competition became too tough, because I prefer working on the underserved markets, creating my own new niches.

That way, step by step, I was coming closer to the next important twist in my life. I was done working in the business I had built up from nothing. The business I put so much effort, attention, and energy into.

Together with my partner, we reached an agreement about the conditions for me leaving the company pretty fast. I thanked him for the cooperation and, as soon as we accomplished our mutual commitments, we parted.

As an entrepreneur, I find some pleasure in imagining and creating something that has never been thought of before. After finishing one project, I started thinking about a new one immediately. I started trying to find a fresh idea, a new sphere where I can establish something original.

In those days there was nothing like a shopping mall, gathering many manufacturers and sellers of a narrow niche together in Novosibirsk, – and in Siberia at all. For example, if you decided to do some home repairs, you would have to wander around the city. You'd buy some wallpaper in one place, electrics – in another one, furniture and interior decor – in the third, and plumbing – somewhere else... That was extremely inconvenient

for both: buyers and manufacturers. I understood: there it was – a wonderful brand-new field for business!

WHILE OTHERS THINK ABOUT SEPARATION, I WILL MERGE.

That occurred to be the key point to achieving the future success of “Bolshaya Medveditsa” trade and exhibition center: give your customers an opportunity to choose, compare and buy all the things they need for their construction or repair work in one and the same place.

I was also inspired by the idea of building “Bolshaya Medveditsa” center, I was creating not only a certain kind of service or products, but also the space itself. A kind of environment for other people and companies to establish and develop. Stores, cafes, restaurants, service companies created a natural synergy effect all together. A huge number of goods, services, and other offers, attracted a significant number of people – potential buyers. On the other hand, a high quantity of buyers stimulated sellers to provide more services, goods and products.

My goal was, in other words, to build a suitable space for the manufacturers and to assist them. The idea proved to be effective: “Bolshaya Medveditsa” lives, develops and prospers to this day.

For about two or three years, I worked on the new business with my natural passion and inspiration. The project pleased me with new opportunities and unexpected solutions. I was able to create and imagine. I had total freedom to design something

brand-new. However, later on, the situation repeated again. I ran into the same wall again. I got that feeling of being disappointed and following it – a sense of the emptiness and meaninglessness of everything I had been doing.

Business and daily rush seized me so much that there was no escape from my depression. I exchanged my expensive cars with the ones which cost a fortune, spent more money on clothes, chose absolutely unbelievable (regarding the price as well) destinations for my trips... Nothing I could imagine made my life more cheerful or better.

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