

Open Water

*Tips and Advice For Taking Your
First Scuba Diving Class*

By Anton Swanepoel



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Anton Swanepoel

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Introduction

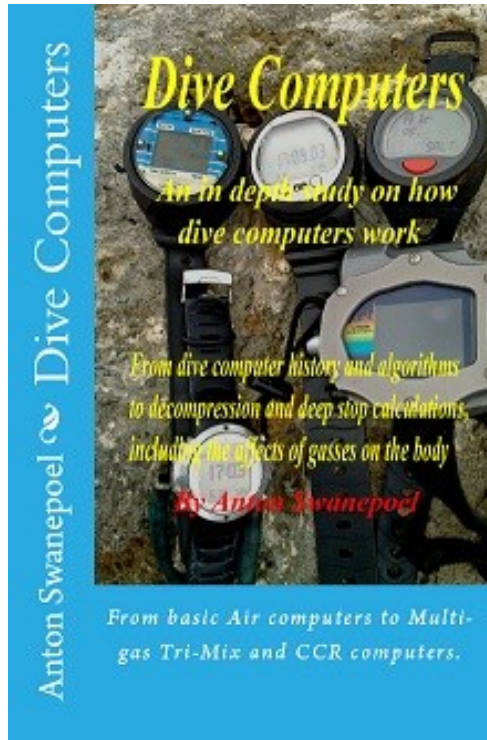
This text was written to help people who are interested in taking their first class in scuba diving. It is intended to prepare individuals for the class by giving some general information and course expectations.

It amazes me how many people start an open water course with one instructor, with the intention of doing the open water dives at another location, only to turn up at the referral location and still have no idea of what to expect.

As this text is not agency specific, it will list general procedures. In addition, note that dive training is flexible and can be conducted in different ways depending on the instructor and the dive location. Nevertheless, the information in this article will give you valuable information, as well as questions you may ask your potential instructor to help you prepare for your open water course.

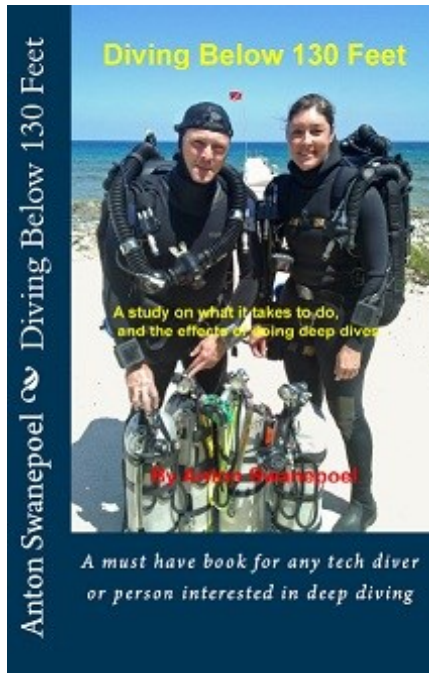
Completing an open water course opens the door to a whole new adventure. There are however a few different ways to complete the course. Let's look at a few of these options.

Welcome to scuba diving.



Why a dive computer? The intent, and what this book delivers, is an education in the types of dive computers available and how they work. What's right for you may not be applicable for your friend. By the end of the guide, you should be able to make a knowledgeable, informed decision on what's best for you.

[Get Your Copy Today](#)



Thinking of diving below 130ft or just interested to know more about deep diving?

Then you may find the information in this book interesting and of value.

Want to know the training needed to get certified to dive below 130, 200, 330ft?

This book looks at the different training available to get you certified to dive to the depth that you want to go to.

What else can I get out of this book?

This book gives an overview of some of the effects of diving on the human body, especially long duration and deep diving. The topics covered will give you a broad overview for each one covered, and is a good starting point to broaden your knowledge of deep diving.

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What is the open water course?

The open water course is an entry level diving course, it is your first step to a new world. The course teaches you the skills needed to safely conduct dives, within the limits of your qualification.

The name and qualification do change between agencies; however, it remains your first step to diving as a certified diver.

How can I take the course?

There are a number of different options available for taking the course – here are a few:

-Full course in one session

Taking the course in one training session over a number of days is one of the most popular ways of completing the course.

Students may do all the training in one place, or start the course academics and pool sessions in one place, and then, with their instructor, go on a diving holiday where the rest of the training is completed. Once all the requirements are achieved, the new divers can enjoy a diving vacation (normally as part of a group). This can be cost effective, as a group normally gets discounts on accommodations, meals, and diving gear. However, the possibility does exist that if a diver does not complete all requirements, for any reason, refunding may not be possible.

Students may complete all the training near their home, and then follow the instructor and other divers (normally those that completed the class with them) to a diving destination for a diving holiday.

-Referral training

Referral training is popular with cruise ship passengers, where access to open water environments is limited, or where water temperatures may require a drysuit.

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There are two types of referral training. First possibility: the instructor, conducting your open water dive evaluation, is the same agency as the instructor with whom you began the course. Second possibility: the referral instructor, conducting your open water dive evaluation, is from a different agency (called universal referral).

You may also complete only your academics with your initiating instructor, and then complete both your pool sessions and open water dives with your referral instructor. Note, if you do your pool sessions with an instructor other than your initiating instructor, then the instructor conducting your pool sessions has to be from the same training agency as the one that completed your academics. Ask the referral location if they have qualified instructors for the agency you train with, before booking your referral dives.

-e-learning

Most training agencies provide an e-learning option for your academic portion of the course. This gives students greater flexibility when their time is limited. Students can do the academics at their own time and any location, where they have a computer and Internet access.

To complete the e-learning option, students are normally required to choose a dive shop, which will help them complete their training. The shop is informed that a student has started their training, opening communication between agency and student. The student is given contact details for the shop, which will enable the student to contact the shop, should the student require assistance with any portion of the academics. It is not uncommon for students to start an e-learning course while booking a diving holiday at the resort or place where they will complete both their pool and open water training. However, some complete the e-learning and pool sessions near their hometown, and then complete the water sessions while on holiday.

Students may also opt to complete the e-learning sessions, pool and open water sessions near their home before going on holiday. This option is normally taken when a student cannot attend the lectures and academics at a local classroom, but can still make the pool and open water sessions.

What do I need to bring with?

Most dive shops, resorts, and other training places include all the necessary gear as part of the training price. However, this is not always the case. Always ask if all the gear is included in the price before you sign up for the course. If gear is not included, get a quote for all the rental gear you will need. Add those prices to the price of the training course and see what the total comes to – that dirt-cheap course may not be as dirt-cheap as you thought. I have known dive shops to charge for tanks used, thus if a student is a little nervous and uses more air than others, they will pay extra for the added tanks used.

Be very wary of dive-training establishments that do not provide all the gear, as part of the package, and have no rental equipment. If it is a small outfit that has no gear, you may be able to rent some from another outfit. However, if the instructor or shop requires you to purchase all your gear, up front, before you take the course, I would walk away and find another training shop. There are so many different styles of masks, fins, BCDs and other gear on the market, how do you know what is right for you before you have even become a diver?

Regardless of whether or not gear is included, you will still need a bathing suit (swimsuit), possibly a hat, sunscreen, and a towel in most cases (some, like the shops I worked for, provide towels and sunscreen for free).

Note, some shops provide all the gear except for mask and fins, they will normally urge you to purchase these items before the class. This may be okay, yet you still do not know how the fins or mask will work until you try them out. If you regularly snorkel, you may test gear first but this is not always the case.

If you are doing a referral course, you need to take your medical form (if you needed a doctor's letter), your logbook, and your referral form that shows proof from your initiating instructor that all academics and pool sessions, if applicable, are completed.

Note: make sure your instructor signs for every skill, not just at the bottom of the page.

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If the instructor is in a hurry, it is possible for them to miss a place where they should sign off for a skill, this can result in the referral instructor refusing to accept the papers and may require you to redo that part of the course. This skills sheet can be in your logbook (normal with PADI), however, it is preferred that a copy of the initiating instructor's form is available. Even if the instructor gives you a copy of their training log, make sure they sign your logbook, and recheck that all skills are signed off in your logbook. You will be the one standing on dry land if everything is not signed, so do not take a 'we will do it later' or 'it is not needed' excuse. The training agency provides sign-off space for a reason; the referral instructor is not trying to be a hard case for not accepting you. They are only following standards and protocol required by their insurance and training agency.

When should I purchase gear?

My advice is to always, if possible, test gear before you purchase it. Rent for a dive or two, and do not invest in gear until you are certified and have made some dives.

Remember, sales people are always sales people. Would you purchase a car without ever riding in it? If the answer is no, then why purchase gear that supports your life underwater if you have not tried it to see if you like it or not? Even a quick dive in a swimming pool may be enough to see how the gear fits you. If possible, rent the same brand and model for a dive or two to see how you like it.

Purchasing gear, before you have some experience, can result in needing to replace gear later or purchasing additional items. Purchasing technical gear, anticipating you may go that route, may have you sitting with expensive gear that is not designed for recreational diving, should technical diving not thrill you. The gear may be uncomfortable and cumbersome to handle. On the flip side, you may purchase recreational gear, only to find out you love diving so much, that you want to go deeper. Now, you may have to purchase gear again that is designed for technical diving.

For some additional information about deeper diving, see my book: [*Diving Below 130 Feet.*](#)

Think before you purchase gear.

Gear-purchase is an investment and dedication to diving. Be certain about the gear that you buy. The gear must fit comfortably for you, and have the features you need for the diving you will be doing.

Also realize gear needs to be maintained and serviced. Normally gear needs to be serviced annually. Thus, although it is nice to have your own gear, if you only do two or three dives a year, it may be cheaper and easier to rent gear at your destination.

One of the most expensive pieces of gear you can buy is a dive computer. A dive computer is such an important piece of gear that its purchase should not be made lightly. There are a staggering number of models on the market, and choosing what is right for you can be a daunting task.

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Luckily, they fall into only a few groups, and if you know what market section each group is aimed at – plus their positive and negative points – it will make your buying decision much easier.

If you are interested in knowing more about dive computers, decompression, deep stops, computer algorithms, the effects of gasses on the body including nitrogen narcosis, you can purchase my book [*Dive Computers*](#) available in both print and Kindle format.

What can I expect in my training?

Although the training sequence can be different from instructor to instructor and between different training agencies, they all follow a set, general outline.

Students will need to complete water evaluations, which normally include floating in a swimming pool for 10 minutes with minimal kicking and sculling, and without touching the bottom or sides of the pool. This is actually easier than it sounds and your instructor will give you tips on how to perform this skill. There will also be, in most cases, a swim test. This normally requires swimming a few laps at your own time, pace, and style in a swimming pool or possibly a lake or ocean (calm conditions). You may, in some cases, also elect to replace the swim test with a snorkel test, where you will be required to snorkel with mask, snorkel, and fins, a predetermined distance.

In some instances, you will need to conduct duck dives (breath holding) to the bottom of the pool or other body of water, with pool like conditions (calm). The depth is normally around 6 to 10 ft (around 2 to 3 meters).

Academics

Depending on the agency, there will be a number of academic sessions or modules that students need to complete. There may be quick quizzes of approximately 10 questions after each module. Students will be required to complete a final exam that needs to be passed with normally 75 to 80% score.

Should students fail to pass the quizzes or final exam, they can rewrite a different or same exam at a later time, with arrangement made by the instructor. Do not stress – exams are not there to fail students, but rather to help establish what information students may need more help with to finish the training.

Skills

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There are a number of skills that need to be learned in the open water course. The list of skills does differ between training agencies, however all should show, teach, and evaluate students on the following core skills. Note, a qualified instructor has to demonstrate a skill to you before you are required to perform it. Should you struggle with a skill, a qualified assistant can help you overcome learning difficulty, after an instructor demonstrates a skill to you. Assistants are not allowed (unless also an instructor) to demonstrate skills to you unless you have already been shown the skill by an instructor.

-Mask clearing

Here you will learn how to clear a flooded mask while remaining underwater. The skill normally starts by clearing a partially flooded mask, in order to prepare you for removing and replacing your mask. This is a skill with which many students struggle. Take it easy, and remember to blow out of your nose and tilt your head slightly back when you clear the mask.

If you struggle in clearing the mask, consider getting a mask that has auto purge valves at the nosepiece – these masks clear a lot easier.

-Remove and replace mask

In this skill you will remove and replace your mask correctly, and clear the mask of water, while remaining underwater. This skill is to acclimate you to breathing underwater without a mask, in case you accidentally lose yours, and to replace and clear it should you retrieve it again (normally with your buddy's help) or have a spare.

Most students struggle more with the clearing of the mask after they have replaced it. However, some do struggle with not breathing through their nose. Relax and think about each step – remind yourself of the need to breathe through your mouth. You can inhale though your mouth and exhale though your nose, if you want.

-Regulator removal and replace

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This skill will teach you how to replace and clear your regulator. This might be the result of removing it to smile for a camera. There are two methods: one you blow the regulator clear with air that is in your lungs, and the second, you use the purge button on the regulator, should you not have enough air left in your lungs when you replace the regulator.

Remember; first clear the regulator of water before taking a breath when you replace the regulator in your mouth.

-Regulator recovery

Here you will learn how to find your regulator again, should it accidentally come out of your mouth, or out of your grasp, when you smiled for the camera. No worry, it is still attached to your tank and your instructor will show you a skill to recover it again. Remember to clear the regulator first when you put it in your mouth before you take a breath.

If you struggle to recover your regulator, remember you have a spare attached to your BCD. Instructors prefer that you reach for your spare instead of bolting to the surface.

-Alternate air source use

This skill teaches how to signal to your buddy that you have an air source problem. As well as how to secure their alternate air source and make your way to the surface as a buddy team. Gear is reliable but just in case, you will learn how to conduct an out of air situation should the gear malfunction or you run out of air (remember to check your pressure gauge often).

-Remove and replace equipment

With these skills you will learn how to remove and replace your BCD and weight belt (if you have one), normally underwater and on the surface. These skills are useful in many situations, including accessing a small boat where kitting up in the boat is difficult, and freeing yourself when becoming entangled.

-Tired diver tow

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Here you will learn different ways to tow your buddy, should your buddy become tired and need assistance. Be aware the pillar valve tow, where you are behind your buddy, is effective when you are swimming on the surface, against a current. This is because the two of you are effectively working together against the current, with only one diver's drag – the other diver is effectively slip-stream-riding.

-Cramp removal

Here you will learn how to remove leg, muscle cramps in both yourself and your buddy, should they occur.

-Emergency safety ascent (controlled emergency safety ascent)

It's important to learn how to make your way to the surface should you experience an air supply problem and your buddy is not available to assist (training for the worst case scenario). Remember; never hold your breath while making your way to the surface.

-Buoyancy control

This skill will teach you how to control your buoyancy with your lungs, remaining motionless at a fixed underwater depth for a predetermined time.

There are additional skills, such as bringing an unconscious diver to the surface, buddy breathing, removing and replacing your power inflator connector underwater, and others that are specific to your training agency. Your instructor will inform you of these. However, the skills explained above form the core skills you will learn in your class.

Note on skills: you have to perform all the required skills in the pool or pool-like conditions first, before you can progress to your open water dives to further demonstrate these skills. Pool skills for one session may be completed, followed by demonstration in open water of those skills. Later on, you can return to the pool to learn new skills and later demonstrate those on subsequent dives.

Regardless of how training is conducted, you have to demonstrate skill mastery in confined sessions, before you can be evaluated in open water. Instructors are not allowed to train you in open water conditions. Thus, if you are doing a referral program, make sure you are shown all the skills, and are confident you can perform them correctly, before leaving the confined sessions to demonstrate the skills to your referral instructor in open water.

If you have not been shown or cannot perform a skill correctly, your referral instructor will have to retake you into a pool, or pool-like conditions, and teach you the skills. This can cost you additional time, money, and possibly exclude you from completing an open water dive on schedule. It might also keep you from completing the course, should time, or an instructor, not be available to complete the needed training for you.

Remember, if you are doing a referral program, the instructor conducting your open water evaluation may not be an instructor in the agency that started your training (common in universal referral programs). However, if you need pool training, the instructor is required to be from the same agency as your initial instructor. If no such qualified instructor is available at the location, you may not be able to complete your training.

Make sure you can perform all the skills needed correctly. Ask your instructor for a list of all the required skills needed for certification. Most have a list in some form, which they tick off as you complete a skill. If they are unwilling or unable to show you the required skills, ask yourself, 'what are they hiding?'

Possible reasons you were not shown a skill may include; a class so large, and time too short for all to receive a demonstration, or a mix up occurs. You may have needed additional training on a skill, but time was never scheduled, or the instructor mistakenly thought you had completed a skill (possibly large group). Thus, if you know you have not completed a skill, you have to inform the instructor so he's aware and will assist in completing the task.

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Note that most instructors are well trained and follow protocol, however, there is a very small number of instructors for whom money is the primary drive. They may allow you to progress, even though you have not done a skill or cannot perform a skill successfully in a pool because it will cost them more time to work with you.

Open water demonstrations

Here you get to demonstrate your ability to perform the learned skills in an open water scenario. The instructor, as mentioned before, may be the same instructor that you started the course with, or can be a different instructor (possibly from a different agency). Since the instructor is not teaching you any skills, only evaluating how you perform the skills correctly, they can be from a different agency, and they are not allowed to demonstrate skills to you in an open water setting. (They may demonstrate a skill in open water if it is pool-like conditions.)

Note on dives, some agencies only require four dives, while others require five. Make sure you know what the requirements are. If you take a universal referral and your agency requires five dives, inform the referral shop of this fact. If not, you may either be charged extra upon arrival for the additional dive, or return to your initiating instructor with only four dives signed off.

The instructor may then charge you extra to complete the additional dive, or may refuse to sign you off, as all requirements are not completed for the course. This has happened and can create difficulty between you, your instructor, and the place you completed your open water evaluations dives. (This normally happens if the instructor, conducting your open water evaluations, is not an instructor in the training agency that you started your course with and are not aware of the requirements).

You should be given a form with a list of skills you need to complete. This form must be handed over to your referral instructor. If none was given, ask for one before you leave for your trip.

Additional Questions

How long does the training take?

Dive training depends largely on how fast you learn, the schedule of your instructor, and the training agency you will use; including the conditions in which you'll train. Training can take 3 days, weeks or months. If you live someplace where dive-water is unavailable, you may need to wait until you can make it to a different location to complete your open water training. You may also need to wait for the ice to melt if living in a place where lakes freeze over. Ask your instructor before signing up.

What is the age requirement?

For most agencies the minimum age is 10 years (some 12 years) for junior open water diver (normally allowed to 40 ft with a parent or a dive professional), with the minimum age being 15 years for full scuba diver rating (60 ft depth limit).

What about medical?

You are required to complete a medical evaluation form before you can conduct any in-water training. These forms are available from each training agency, as they differ. Ask your instructor or download them from the training agency website, and complete it before you start your course. If you answer yes to any questions on the form, you are required to consult with a doctor who will need to sign you off for being fit to dive.

If you do not complete the form before you start training, you may run the risk of needing to find a doctor in a hurry before a course begins. You could possibly miss the course, if scheduled at a holiday resort and a doctor is not immediately available. At the very least, scan read the form and note any questions you will have to answer in the affirmative.

There are certain conditions and illnesses that preclude you from diving. These can include asthma (depending on severity), heart conditions (also depending on severity), blood pressure issues, epilepsy, some lung disorders (like severe bronchitis or lung obstructions), taking certain prescription medication (like anti-depressants or medication for psychological conditions), being over 45 years old, and some other conditions depending on the training agency. It is advisable that you take out medical insurance (DAN: divers alert network is a good example) that covers you for any diving injury you may sustain during the course. However rare, injury is still possible, and treatment (like hyperbaric treatment) is very expensive.

Some medical insurance companies do not cover you for diving, and some death policies totally exclude you when you partake in a dangerous sport. Your death policy may just list scuba diving as a dangerous sport – find out before you sign up for the course.

Certification

The instructor which is to provide your certification depends on how your course was completed – utilizing one instructor or a course with a referral instructor, as well as what training agency you selected.

Some agencies (PADI for example) require the instructor, which conducted your last evaluation dive, gives you the certification. While others (normally universal referrals) have the instructor who conducts your last evaluation dive sign a form that informs your initiating instructor that you completed all the skills. This enables the initiating instructor to issue the final certification. Make sure you know who and when will give your certification.

Also confirm, if you do a referral program and need to go back to your initial instructor, if there are additional processing fees for him to certify you, or if it is included in the initial course price.

If you cannot finish the entire course, some training agencies (such as Padi), allow a lower level certification. (Scuba diver for Padi that allows you to dive to 40ft with a dive professional). You can then, at a later date, continue your training.

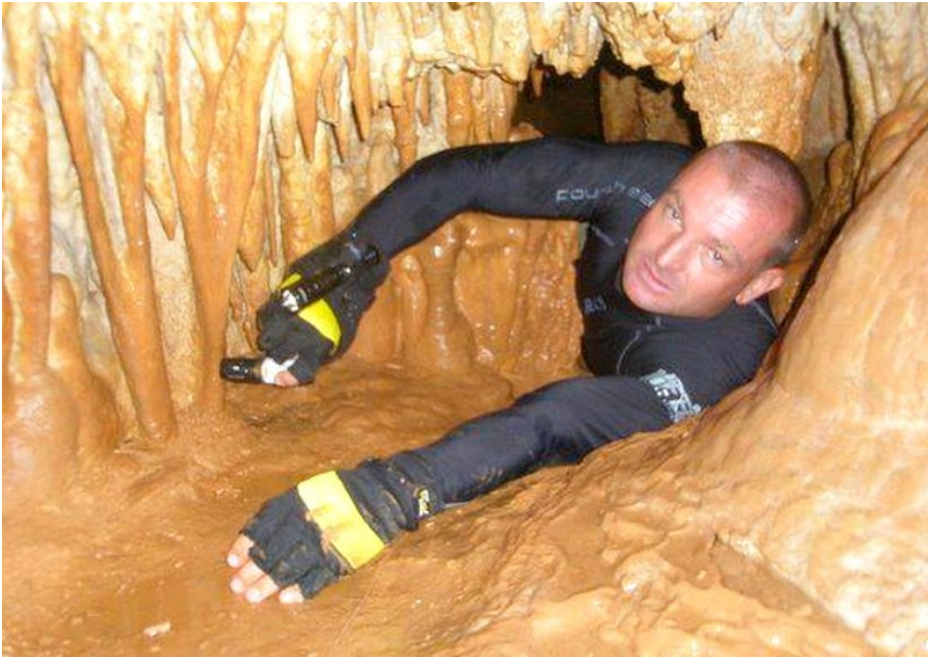
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Take note that both universal referral and normal referral paperwork have an expiratory date. In some cases, you have to complete your open water dives within three months of your pool sessions (normally universal referral). Check your forms, as your referral instructor may refuse to accept your paperwork, and require you to retake the entire class.

After completing the classwork, the instructor may do an online registration for your dive certification, or give you paperwork that you need to post to the training agency yourself (not that common but still happens in remote locations, such as Mexico). That paperwork has an expiratory date (normally one year). If you do not send the paperwork in – you are not certified. If the paperwork expires before you send it in, you will need to redo the entire class.

Now that you are more educated about your upcoming course, I hope you are more relaxed about it, and look forward to your training sessions. I wish you all the best for your diving and hope you gain immense joy from diving.

About the Author



As a Technical Diving Instructor and Cave Diver with over seven years' experience working in different places, including the Cayman Islands, I have come to believe that limits are what you set for yourself. I used to be afraid of water until I forced myself into a diving course, and then things just kept going and the thing I feared gave me what I dreamed of doing, travel. Having dived to over 400ft on open circuit, I realize how much of life we miss if we let fear run our life.

Sometimes, life is like a dark tunnel that feels like it is going to squeeze the life from you. However, if you just keep going, you are bound to come out the other side. I love writing, travel, diving, caves, motorcycles, and speed, but as a Reiki Master Teacher, I know you have to balance your life with love, and compassion. Be proud to stand firm in your quest for your dreams, but humble enough to ask for help in reaching them.

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