Avalanche Survival Strategies For Different Parts of a Flowing Avalanche

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Swimming in avalanches has recently been questioned, with detractors stating that “swimming leads to dying.” Since no direct scientific evidence exists to either refute or support the idea of swimming, we combine the practical experience of avalanche survivors with our emerging knowledge of avalanche dynamics to arrive at possible survival strategies for different parts of flowing avalanches. Practical experience and avalanche dynamics theory are largely consistent and suggest the following strategies: 1) Once an avalanche is released, every effort must be made to get off the moving slab, 2) After being caught, the victim must do everything possible to try to get toward the back, or tail, of the avalanche since this is where avalanches run out of mass and where a victim is more likely to be left behind by the slide, 3) Experience shows that in some avalanches a backstroking and log rolling motion may help the victim stay near the surface and move toward the flanks of the avalanche, and 4) If at all possible, the head of the avalanche should be avoided since the turbulent flow and large forces in this area increase the odds of injury and deep burial. Though it cannot be definitively proven, experience and avalanche dynamics theory suggest that swimming - or as some call it, “struggling” - is part of a viable strategy for surviving an avalanche once you are caught.