BECOMING A MOUNTAIN **Stephen Alter**

What Mountains Mean

The most important step toward becoming a mountain is to close the books that others have written and read only those texts imprinted upon rock and ice or in the forests and streams that cascade from above. In *Mountains of the Mind,* climber and historian, Robert MacFarlane describes "the great stone book" from which geologists draw conclusions about the origins of our planet, creation myths etched upon the land. Volumes of truth are shelved away in the mountains that reveal mysteries beyond our comprehension. And yet, these high places are linked to us with molecular affinity. The minerals in our bodies, the calcium in our bones and the iron in our blood, share the same substance as the mountains. If we were to break down our bodies into basic elements out of which we are made, we would understand that we are simply a resurrection of chemicals in the earth we tread. And the ashes that remain after a cremation are no different from ancient carbons in the soil. In turn, those carbons are reconfigured into an organic whole every time a living plant or creature is conceived…

Our insistence on being different from everything around us is one of the greatest mistakes of mankind. We stubbornly maintain an illusory distinction that sets us apart from rock and ice, water and fire, plant and animal. Both religion and rationality try to explain it through an elaborate vocabulary of separation – soul, *atman*, spirit, ghosts in the machine or simply the idea of selfhood. We have dreamed up gods so that we can reassure ourselves that somewhere, someday, somehow, after this life is over, something awaits us, a presence that recognizes who we are. But if we approach a mountain instead, accepting that we are nothing more or less, then our ego merges with the nature of the mountain.

In this constant quest for high places, we must erase our desires for meaningless victories or revelations. Rather than conquering a summit, or becoming the first to leave our footprints in the snow, we must absorb the knowledge of a mountain's presence while, at the same time, allowing ourselves to be absorbed into a greater awareness of what it may or may not represent. Questions and answers should be discarded, as we approach the mountain for what it is, free of any preconceptions or beliefs.. The paradox of mountains lies in the enormity of their stature as well as the invisible space they occupy inside ourselves.

A Buddhist parable, translated by Arthur Waley, relates a story about the 8th century dhyana master Wei-k'uan, who lived in the Shaol-lin Monastery on Mt. Sung. He was asked by one of the monks: "What is the Way?" Wei-k'uan answered: "This is a nice mountain, isn't it?" "But I was asking you about the Way, not about the mountain," protested the monk. "The mountain is something you understand," said the dhyana master. "The Way is not."

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Among all of its muscular and esoteric contortions, Yoga includes the *tadasana*, or mountain stance. It is one of the simplest of all physical postures, in which a person stands erect with his or her feet firmly planted on the ground, arms held at the sides, palms facing inward. The chest is pushed out and the chin raised, no different than a sentry standing at attention. In this way, an adept practitioner of yoga takes on the mountain’s lofty demeanor, its resilience and dominating stature. Breathing is controlled and eyes are closed. Sinews and skeleton, nerves and blood vessels, mucous and bile, every gland and organ becomes an integral part of a somatic metaphor, while the practitioner focuses on a mental image of a perfect mountain, unattainable yet fully realized in mind and body.

“When the sage climbs the heights of Yoga,” the *Bhagavad Gita* explains, “he follows the path of work; but when he reaches the heights of Yoga, he is in the land of peace.” (6:3)

Challenging his followers to engage in a physical and spiritual renaissance, Swami Vivekananda, the great Hindu reformer who helped introduce Hinduism to the West, has written: “You will understand the Gita better with your biceps, your muscles, a little stronger. You will understand the Upanishads better and the glory of the *Atman* when your body stands firm upon your feet and you will feel yourselves as men.”

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Early Greek geographers and historians, who visited India following Alexander’s campaigns, describe “fabulous races” of men living in the mountains, whose feet are turned around in the wrong direction. In *Historia Naturalis* Pliny writes with some skepticism about these “antipodes.” He reports: “According to Megasthenes, on a mountain called Nulo, there live men whose feet are turned backward and who have eight toes on each foot; while on many of the mountains there lives a race of men having heads like those of dogs, who are clothed with skins of wild beasts, whose speech is barking, and who, being armed with claws, live by hunting and fowling…”

Stories of demons, vampires and witches, whose feet are reversed, have always been part of the folklore of India. In most cases, the purpose of this aberration is to fool whoever tries to track the demon down. Those who attempt to follow their footprints, end up going in the wrong direction where, unsuspecting, they fall victim to an ambush…

It is difficult to imagine how anyone might be able to walk if their toes were pointed in a direction opposite to their face. The added riddle is whether these mythological creatures actually move forwards or backwards. In his autobiography, *Tiger of the Snows*, Tenzing Norgay, recalls how folklore in western Nepal describes the yeti as having its feet pointing backwards. Mountaineers who find the footprints of an abominable snowman on a glacier must wonder whether the beast is coming or going. For human beings, whose sense of direction and balance is based on the way in which our anatomy has evolved, there is something deeply unsettling, almost perverse, about footprints that lead in the wrong direction.

One of the strangest myths that Megasthenese relates is about an Himalayan race of men without mouths, "…who live near the source of the Ganges, who requiring nothing in the shape of food, subsist on the odour of wild apples, and when they go on a long journey they carry these with them for safety of their life, which they can support by inhaling their perfume. Should they inhale very foul air, death is inevitable."

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The architecture of our bodies is as fabulous as any of the imaginary races of man that early Greek tourists reported in India. Our feet, our ankles, knees and hips are all aligned to make us move efficiently and comfortably along a trail. Our limbs are oriented to the future. The grotesque reversal of this marvelous feat of anatomical engineering suggests a distortion that we reject as evil or demonic. As we walk forward, whether stepping on heels or toes, each of us sets off on journeys short or long. Our mobility is what keeps us alive. It is the verb in the sentence, the wick inside the flame, the pulse in the vein.

When I walk regularly, I feel healthier and less hungry for the kind of food and drink that poisons my body. My mind expels the stress and anxiety that builds up during the day. On a walk, I seldom think in any constructive or methodical manner, allowing my brain to react to the sensory experiences along the way, rather than trying to solve a problem or compose a story. This helps ease the tension of work and frees my thoughts to dwell on happier things than debts or deadlines.

Whenever I find myself depressed, pinned down by that terrible sense of immobility that makes everything seem hopeless, I force myself to go for a walk. Most times, this helps lift the oppressive burden of doubt and despair. At first, when I start walking to escape that relentless sadness, I feel like a creature with my feet turned backwards, not wanting to move, possessed by demonic forces. But gradually my footsteps straighten and I find myself proceeding in the same direction as my senses and my thoughts...

As we have evolved into a sedentary species, the urge to migrate, to hunt and gather, has been suppressed by the impediments of modern life. Like other instincts that civilization denies us, this often leads to discontentment and depression. The hunter in me struggles to break free of monotonous routines and, worse than that, the unhappy state of killing time. Denied the impulsive need to roam in search of prey, I feel constricted and ill-at-ease in the company of others. I want to stalk in silence, separating myself from conflicted relationships and responsibilities, becoming one with the wild.

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A good many writers are walkers too. In his collection of essays *Walking the Dead Diamond River*, Edward Hoagland tallies up some of the pedestrian achievements of English poets: "Samuel Taylor Coleridge is said to have walked as far as forty miles in a day, and Carlyle once logged fifty-four in twenty-four hours on a walking tour. Wordsworth, the champion in this league, was calculated (by De Quincey) to have toted up 175,000 to 180,000 miles in a lifetime of peregrinations afoot. 'I have two doctors,' said Sir George Trevelyan of English-style walking, 'my left leg and my right.'"

Though he doesn't quote Thoreau, Hoagland refers to his legacy. "The American brand of walking of course has a different mystique, almost forgotten lately, which dates back to the frontier and has little to do with the daily 'constitutional' and therefore should be exercised in a setting so brawny and raw that the mileage can't even be guessed."

In search of this experience and disillusioned by the war in Vietnam, Hoagland uprooted himself from New York City in the 1970s and purchased a farm in upstate Vermont, with a hundred acres of woodland. Here he could walk freely in the forests surrounding Mt. Hor, one of the least developed regions of New England. Yet even in this isolated Eden, he writes about an awareness of limits: "Against the sense of exuberant release I felt on long walks in the woods was the knowledge that this in fact was just a hermetic patch of wilderness with highways on all sides, scarcely larger than a park: it was a ship in a bottle, and I was only hiding out."

This problem afflicts us all, both as writers and as walkers, the shrinking margins beyond which our natural surroundings no longer extend. In the Himalayas, as much as any other place on earth, there is a growing sense of containment, even in the wildest forests and remote valleys. Except on the highest peaks, we are never more than a day's walk from some kind of settlement. As the network of roads expand along rivers and over ridge tops, the world of concrete, polythene and human ordure proliferates. India's ballooning population, well over a billion now, includes growing numbers of Himalayan residents, as well as seasonal migrants. On one level, it seems selfish, perhaps unethical, to complain about a walk in the woods being disturbed by the encroaching needs of those who struggle for a meal each day. But conservation is a good and righteous thing, just as important as the alleviation of poverty. Some activists have shown that the two objectives complement each other. In the race for survival, however, human beings have a distinct edge over other species and the natural world is becoming more and more constricted and polluted by the day.

It will be a sad moment when every trail in the mountains leads to a dung heap, and one cannot walk for a mile, up or down, without crossing a motor road, where the exhaust fumes of vehicles foul the air. I think of Megathenese's mythical race of Himalayan inhabitants, who sustained themselves through smell alone, living off the perfume of apples. They would not survive today as "too strong an odour would readily kill them." Neither would those other "fabulous" creatures with their feet turned the wrong way round. Where would their footsteps lead them, except backwards into the future, where extinction awaits us all?