

## **Not Climbing the Mountain**

by Alan Zundel

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Some people have used a metaphor of climbing a mountain for the spiritual life, and progress is seen as climbing steadily higher and higher. That image can be misleading.

I have read that evolutionary theory proposed the idea of “punctuated equilibrium.” It means there are periods of stability in the geological record with small, incremental changes in life forms occurring, punctuated by sudden disruptions where things change quickly and a whole new set of life forms emerge. This idea can apply to the spiritual life, because there will be periods where growth is incremental in a certain direction, then moments where things change suddenly and it is a whole different situation.

The image of climbing a mountain implies continual effort in a single direction, usually that of changing our behaviors and learning new ideas. You work to become a better person by changing habits that cause harm to others, trying to live more ethically. And you make intellectual effort to understand the world in a way that includes a transcendent dimension, studying scriptures, listening to teachers and speakers, reading books, and so on. Both of those are positive things, but at a certain point cease to be as fruitful.

Once your behavior is fairly well ethically oriented and your mind is able to make sense of a spiritual perspective on life, it is hard to know where to go from there. Do I need to make extra efforts to be morally perfect, perhaps to avoid even having an angry thought? Should study harder for further understanding, maybe working on a detailed knowledge of the scriptures? The image of climbing a mountain is misleading because it tells you to keep making the same kind of efforts even though they are not paying off in further growth.

The way forward is not more effort of the same kind; in fact, it is not more effort at all. If you have been climbing the mountain a long time and the peak is still hard to see, you have a choice. You can push yourself even harder to get there, or you can sit down, take a breath, relax and enjoy the view.

If you choose to sit back and relax, what happens? Surprisingly, the mountain behind you will feel like it is crumbling and you will fall right through it, as though there is a huge tunnel behind you. You begin falling, but a draft of air suddenly picks you up and carries you up to the top! No effort needed, and you can now see the mountain from a new perspective.

That does not mean there is no effort in the spiritual life; you had to make efforts to get to the point where that tunnel was. It may be hard to know where that point is, but something in you will feel like you have worked at it for a long time, are uncertain of the way forward, and are ready for a different approach.

Instead of climbing a mountain, another metaphor would be clearing a weed-entangled field. First you start cutting down the weeds—this represents the effort needed to develop ethical behavior and a spiritual way of understanding the world. This work is really aimed at clearing the ground and creating room for plants that had been choked off by the weeds. You are not just learning new behaviors, you are unlearning old behaviors and creating a path for new behaviors to emerge. You are not just learning new ideas, you are unlearning old ways of thinking and clearing the ground for an innate sense of wisdom to emerge.

Cutting down the weeds is cutting down the old habits of behavior and thought that are not true to who you really are. Now imagine you have pretty much cleared out the weeds and are standing in this field with the plants that are left. Now what? You can keep working, trying to find the smaller weeds that you may have missed, or you can stop and relax.

If you stop and relax, you realize that without the weeds you are standing in an emerging garden. Like the garden of Eden, where God came like a cool breeze, you will soon begin to feel a breeze moving through the garden. The breeze will move you the way forward. The way forward is not continuing to make efforts of your own, but allowing that breeze to move your behavior and your mind. It is effortless.

The hard part is to let go of your desire to control things. Like a breeze, you do not know where this inner movement comes from or where it is going, but it is going to take you somewhere, it is going to bring something to you, through you something new will emerge from it. This change is discontinuous with the previous period of your spiritual life where you were making efforts. It is going to be effortless; the big effort really is to get out of the way, to get yourself to stop making those efforts. Just let the breeze move you, let it come through you, let it express itself in the way it is going to.

### Dialogues

Q: When you said that the hardest part is to just get out of the way, to stop trying so hard, it makes me think of acknowledging what is. That is a hard thing to do. We are brought up to think we have to do things instead of just being. So it is switching gears, a real different mindset.

A: It will run against the grain because people can understand the idea of working to improve yourself; whether for spiritual reasons or not, they can understand working to improve your behavior, working to learn new ideas. Unless they are at the point where this makes sense to them, people cannot accept the idea of just letting something move you, just letting go, giving in. They will object to it, they will not understand it, they will resist it.

Q: That reminds me of a poem, “The Hound of Heaven.” I certainly understand that in our culture we are taught to do things, and it is hard to stop. I don’t know quite what it would mean in my life—I mean, I need to hear it, but like you say, until you are at the point of

knowing what exactly it is that you quit doing, it is hard to figure it out. It sounds very non-rational, non-head stuff, the language of the heart.

A: You never really figure it out. You can get to the point where it makes sense to you, but not sense in a head way. It makes sense in a heart way. You feel it. That hound of heaven image is good because you feel something chasing you, and you don't know what it is. At first you are running away from it, making an effort to stay ahead of it. Then you realize it is going to catch you sooner or later, so you may as well let it catch you and see what happens.

Q: When he said, 'I don't know what I would stop doing, or what it would mean in my life'—I think for me it would be just stopping and accepting who I am, and that is good enough. That God loves me as I am. For me I think that is it.

A: Yes, being who you are, being who you were created to be. The easiest thing in the world should be to express who you were meant to be. Yet it is difficult because sometimes it does not seem like it is enough, like we need to add on to that or make it better in some way. God knew what God was doing when we were created.

Q: The Christianity that I was brought up in gets in the way, too, because we have to deal with original sin. Somehow we are not good enough.

A: There are two ways of thinking about what is inside of us. One is that whatever is at our core is terribly wrong, and we need to overcome that. The other is that whatever is at our core is terribly right, but somehow we have allowed that to become obscured. The history of the doctrine of original sin is convoluted, but if that is a hang-up for you, look into the history of the doctrine and find out where it came from. Is it from early Christianity and the Bible or did it come at a later date? My view is that it was a later distortion.

Q: You were talking about an image of climbing a mountain; I think that represents goals, head-stuff, expectations of being human doings rather than human beings. I kind of expected that in contrast you would be talking about going within. How much of it, in your view, involves human self-scrutiny, probing, facing the shadow side of ourselves?

A: I would say that is part of the transition from one phase to the other. In that initial phase of making efforts you may start to turn within and self-examine; if you do not start doing that you will probably never get to the second phase. But once you come to the second phase and open up to the inner movement, things will be dredged up from inside you and presented to you. It is not as much of an effort to look within at that point, but you need a willingness to see what comes from within and to accept it and to allow it to find its place within the composition of your personality. Deep hurts, problems, or traumas cannot be resolved unless you allow them to emerge into the light of day. So I would say it is a transitional phase: you begin to make efforts to look within, and then you find the process of the within taking on a life of its own and bringing things up. Then you have to let what is happening happen, try not to put the lid back on.

Q: It looks to me like in Western civilization, or at least American culture, and perhaps the Christian culture behind it, people often have tremendous feelings of guilt for what comes up. What do you do with guilt?

A: Well, there are different forms of guilt. One form of guilt will be regret for having done something that harms other people or does harm in other ways, maybe to the environment or to animals or to yourself. That kind of guilt is simply an acknowledgement that there is something in your behavior that still needs to be corrected, so it is in that phase of learning more ethical behavior. Another form of guilt is this deep sense that there is something that is not quite right, something inside you is not quite resolved. This stems from the sense of being a separate entity from everything around you. It is an attachment to what is individual without an acknowledgement of the connection with the whole. That sense of not being quite right will be there until that breaks open. When you get to the point of breaking through that, it is you longer just you within; it is all, it is everything, it is oneness. The barrier between your sense of who you are and what is out there becomes transparent—you feel the oneness with other people, with life, with God, with whatever this is that is happening. At that point the sense of something not being quite right disappears, and you can accept the goodness of who you are and the goodness of all that is.

Q: Sometimes sin is defined as separation: from self, God, relationships with others, environment. And what you are talking about is an antidote to this feeling of sinfulness and separation.

A: Yes, original sin is the creation of this false sense of self. The story of Adam and Eve is not a story about what happened way back when, it is a story about what happens to each of us when we turn away from our inner sense of oneness and start constructing the personality that is separate. It is the breakthrough of that separate self that is the breakdown of original sin; that is salvation, the return to God.

Q: I have always thought that each person is unique, that each person has a place with his or her uniqueness. That is an important part of my self image and what it means to be me.

A: That is not untrue, it is just not the complete truth. If you look at it from a logical standpoint, you seem to be a separate individual yet you know you are constantly ingesting food and incorporating it into your body, ingesting air and incorporating it into your body, your body is primarily water that you have to keep replenishing, your thoughts are largely absorbed from the society around you. So everything that seems unique and individual can also be shown to be part of a whole that is passing through this locus where we are paying attention to what is here within this artificial boundary. In perceptual terms it is very real to us, but in logical terms it is not real at all. What are we really? Who knows? Maybe some kind of vibrational—what, atoms and molecules interacting with the world around you—

Q: And it is mainly space, which is the fascinating thing.

A: Yeah, it goes over my head. But what I am saying is that there are two sides to it. We are usually so focused on this individual separateness that we do not acknowledge the other side. It is allowing that other side to emerge and seeing that they are both true, even though it seems contradictory and paradoxical. And you can perceive them as true—you can see the oneness, at the same time you see the uniqueness.

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