

ZEN IN THE ART OF CLIMBING

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Imagine. Place yourself below a crux-any crux as long as it taunts, tightens your breath and dampens your palm; remember the protection barely adequate wafting gently too many feet below; and recall the cramped position with you not resting, holding as lightly yet as determinedly as you can with the forearms slowly pumping. Have you placed yourself? Can you think yourself back into that familiar enticing yet fearful situations? This is rock climbing's quintessential paradigm case. Are you not there? Good. Let your mind take you slowly and self-consciously through those next moments, minutes or hours until the adrenalin leads you gently back down, and your world is filled with euphoria the pink-golden all conquering glow that makes the moment all alright, and allows you for that instant to be invincible as you dance and velvet foot up the easier rocks above. Hold that time before you- those stand-still moments when past and future coalesce to add counterpoint to existence. Hold the experience and let us explore the meaning.

If I am right and leading the crux of a route near the limit of one's ability provides us with 'rock climbing's quintessential paradigm case', then analysing our behaviour during that period of time should illuminate in a powerful way some of the essential qualities of our sport. At least that is what I hope; in any case it is this idea that provides the impetus for this brief essay.

Reading first-hand accounts of rock climbs is becoming an increasingly boring and fruitless enterprise. In the same way as expedition books tend to follow a characteristically banal formula (vide Dave Roberts in *Ascent*, Vol.111, 1980), so do descriptions of modern rock climbs. Young bronzed leader after months spent on the local climbing wall or boulder 'wiring' his (sic!) perception of the crux moves (a time during which all others have failed spectacularly at 'his'chosen line) finally approaches the route. Resplendent in white denims our hero (oops, sorry! leader) performs his pre-route ritual, chalks up makes, a quick inspection of his rack and with an assured glance at his second, launches himself at the initial moves of the route.

All of this is described in a terse, modest style and so it continues until the crux is reached. Now the narrative expands to gladiatorial proportions. The stage is set to describe in minute detail the major actors; our leader and his opponent-the fearful, overhanging, undercut, poorly-protected (friendless?), crack that looms and leans above. The first tentative forays are described, as the combatants take each other's measure (a sort of rock foreplay), and then our leader realises that his sequence of moves are THE ones and with confidence inspired by months of practice/reading he climbs/describes in utterly precise technical movements\language the exact sequence of moves needed to overcome the enemy. The rest of the climb/article is anticlimactic, the climax has come...and gone, and the episode peters out. And so it is with minor and increasingly unethical variations such as yo-yoing, wiring moves on

a top rope or pre-placing protection on crags, and in magazines and journals throughout the western world. I suppose it is to be expected: climbing has reached a stage of development where mainstream societal values increasingly impose themselves on a sport that revels in technical sophistication and that has a penchant for over-emphasising the role of individual psychology. So it is inevitable that many articles propound values which emphasise rationally, man versus nature, analytic empiricism, and evaluation in terms of normative performance criteria.

What I find even more disturbing is the ubiquity of these values. Even such sensitive, creative, articulate, and deep think climbers as Royal Robbins and Jim Perrin write in this way. Remember Robbins' creative little piece in the back of *Advanced Rockcraft* where he describes a new route he did at Lovers' Leap with (the equally ubiquitous) Ken Wilson. In describing the crux section Robbins wrote:

There had to be a way. And that I saw it: The problem was that if I attempted to stand up with my foot on the centre grey knob, my arm would be bending. It would take strength to pull up, and worse, as I got higher, there would be an outward pull on my fingers, and they might slip. If I could keep my arm straight.....I was breathing hard in anticipation of the effort. Soon I was ready. I had to go. I sank my fingers in the grey knob. My toes moved to the smudges below: left foot, right, left then right leg arching up and the foot carefully set on the now familiar centre knob. I pulled forward towards that foot and up, reaching to my limit, fingers on the edge. I had it. Then... easy...I pivoted a bit, arching my back, getting more weight on the right foot, and keeping my right arm, its fingers gripping the high edge, extended. With a quick movement I took the fingers of my left hand from their grip and – this was the worst moment – turned my hand around and pressed the heel of it down on the sloping hold. I could then push on my left hand, gaining six critical inches, and could move my other hand up and right to, as I had guessed, a more secure edge. My total being was focused on that right hand, and it pulled me up, up until I could remove my left hand and replace it with my left foot. Phew, heavy duty!

Even Perrin, that cavalier romantic endlessly epicurean epithet-giver described the crux of Vector (of all climbs!) in this way: '...the crux area, hanging over your head, a great curved blade of rock, thin edged, fretted, rust coloured, the ochre slab; a strange name for an overhanging groove. Hard to leave the Pinnacle behind, body lean, kick round into balance and teeter upwards, hand groping for a long rounded hold; a treacherous, unwashed ally, grease spattered from this roasting spit of a crux. Tiny footholds, aching calves, a move to be made....breathless move up, convulsive, the tiniest footholds; an excruciating hand change, layback, bridge, and you're on the ochre slab at an old bent peg. Nothing more beautiful.' But I want you to remember the experience, then search for the meaning and now ask yourself: Is it really like that? In the space that remains I want to argue that rock-climbing is not like that. But if it is like that to you, then the contemporary and normative emphasis on technology, rationality, ends-means thinking, performance criteria, and on dimensionality has subverted climbing's essential

values and reduced it to a sterile series of unemotional acrobatic movements. You may have had the experience, but you have missed the meaning. Let's do it again. Leader approaches crux-it still taunts, the throat still tightens and the palms still sweat: protection waves back from below, the non-resting position is cramped and you are tiring too quickly. You move up cautiously, tentatively probing the way ahead, the solution blurs, your mind cannot think that far, return to non-rest, the feet are cramping and relax as you will the pumping steadily increases in the forearms. The breathing shallows and you move up once again, but still you cannot see beyond the strait gate.

Anxiety increases you wonder how long you can continue to non-rest, you move up from foot to foot and consider retreating, but then remember how poor the runner is waving up at you from below. "David, relax, clam down, take a deep breath, you have been here before, relax into the rock, let it clam you, you know you can do it, remember all those other times, clam...now go with it." Less tentatively I move up, commitment increases with movement until I am embroiled in the crux and go through the right passage; a series of timeless moments, a series of intelligent precise yet unconscious and unknown actions, a rock –conforming dance and emerge joyful, the master and the servant of the dance. That's how it is with me, not always, but often enough to know that is how it can be.

What I am saying is that climbing is in its most profound form a spiritual act. Spirituality, in the sense that I am using it here, implies an individual state where conscious technical ability has been absorbed into the intrinsic discipline of the activity; where the essence of you, the climber, is meshed with the essence of your art, climbing. Of course we can climb 'unspiritually' and not feel what I have just described; but when that happens societal values have intervened, the one dimensionality that has invaded other potentially spiritual activities (skiing, perhaps) has done the same for climbing. Climbing is a multi – dimensional textured and liberating experience, but it seems to me that we are losing much of its richness.

Let me contrast this example with my earlier and perhaps somewhat unfair stereotype of the modern rock climber. In both instances a climber approaches a crux that lies at the boundary of his (but it could be her) competence; there is hesitation, apprehension, commitment and then the crux is efficiently climbed. If we were there, personal idiosyncracies aside, we would be observing similar events. Yet scratch below the surface and they are worlds apart. In the first instance climber and rock are in opposition, the former overcomes because sheer technical efficiency, and the performance is measured in terms of normative criteria, 5.6, 5.12, or whatever. In the latter example, climber and rock suffuse to create the experience, success is a function of transcending technical competence, and evaluation is authenticated in action. Pirsig makes a similar distinction in 'Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance':

'Phadrus never reached the mountain. After the third day he gave up, exhausted, and the pilgrimage went on without him. He said he had the physical strength but that physical strength wasn't enough. He had the

intellectual motivation but that wasn't enough either. He didn't think he had been arrogant but thought that he was undertaking the pilgrimage to broaden HIS experience, to gain understanding for HIMSELF. He was trying to use the mountain for his own purposes and the pilgrimage too. He regarded himself as the fixed entity, not the pilgrimage or the mountain, and thus wasn't ready for it. He speculated that the other pilgrims, the ones who reached the mountain, probably sensed the holiness of the mountain so intensely that each footstep was an act of devotion, an act of submission to the holiness. The holiness of the mountain infused into their own spirits enabled them to endure far more than anything he, with his greater physical strength, could take'.

To the untrained eye ego-climbing and selfless climbing may appear identical. Both kinds of climbers place one foot in front of the other. Both breathe in and out at the same rate. Both stop when tired. Both go forward when rested. But a difference.!

For me the most succinct expression of the essence of Zen has been put by D.T. Suzuki in his introduction to Eugen Herigel's beautiful little book 'Zen in the Art of Archery':

'If one really wishes to be master of an art, technical knowledge of it is not enough. One has to transcend technique so that the art becomes an "artless art" growing out of the Unconscious. In the case of Archery, the hitter and the hit are no longer two opposing objects, but are one reality. The archer ceases to be conscious of himself as the one who is engaged in hitting the bull's eye which confronts him. This state of unconsciousness is realised only when, completely empty and rid of the self, he becomes one with the perfecting of his technical skill, though there is in it something of a quite different order which cannot be attained by any progressive study of the art.'

The use of the word 'transcend' is important in the context. In conceptualising climbing in this way I am not denying the importance of technical ability, but it is only a starting point, and I believe that the over-emphasis on technique inserts a wedge between the experience and meaning of climbing. The Zen-climber (to use Pirsig's phrase) transcends technique to become one with the rock. The self-conscious reification of individual achievement so characteristic of modern-day rock climbing has no place in Zen climbing. Rather, it is the subjugation of self, the unconscious blending of skill and environment, that leads to the inevitable certain movement of climber across rock. Inevitability too is an important word, for the pattern within which we act and suffer is broader than we know, and once committed the outcome cannot be in doubt, the dance leads over the crux as surely, deliberately and inextricably as the arrow finds the bull's-eye. To use my friend Bill Summer's felicitous phrase, commitment implies 'following time's arrow along its only path.'

Bernard Amy's essay 'The greatest climber in the world' illuminates this theme well. In it he tells of Tronc Feuillu, an archetypical Zen climber who, having astounded the climbing world with this ascent of the direct North Face of

Mount Rekwai, retires to meditation whilst his companions continue to make other climbs. Amy's meeting with Tronc Feuillu involved the ascent of a flawless ochre-coloured 20-foot high granite boulder. So complete was Tronc Feuillu's meditative preparation for the ascent of the boulder, that as he moved towards it his feet did not crush the blades of the grass but gently parted them. The climb itself was executed so effortlessly and economically, that the elegance of the movements served to erase the very inertia of those movements. Later Tronc Feuillu tells Amy of Chi-Ch'ang who aspired to become the greatest climber in the world. Despite his consummate technical skill Chi-Ch'ang lacked humility and self-discipline, and the story tells of long years of preparation under the guidance of two great masters, first Wei-Fei and latterly Kan Ying where Chi-Ch'ang's is gradually stripped of his ego involvement in climbing, and learns how to concentrate, to see, and to become one with the mountain. So complete and extended is this preparation (which incidentally came after Chi Ch'ang achievement of the highest of technical skill) that Chi Ch'ang eventually merited the accolade 'the greatest climber in the world'; but paradoxically it is only then that Chi Ch'ang realises that the ultimate stage of climbing is not to climb' and true enough his transcendence is so complete that he never climbs again.

As I wrote those last words I could imagine some readers feeling that although Amy's essay may be an attractive parable, it is just too fanciful and is basically irrelevant to contemporary rock –climbing.

But wait-think of John Gill, that 'master of rock', and his unroped first ascent of 'The Thimble', probably the most serious, difficult and mystical of his legacy of climbs. Having mastered the lower section of the climb, Gill prepares for the complete ascent and described it thus: Eventually I worked myself into such a fevered pitch that I committed myself to the top portion and very fortunately made it. It's like a lot of other sporting activities. You not only get psyched up but almost become hypnotised or mesmerised to the point where your mind goes blank, and you climb by well-cultivated instinct. You do it.

Gill is here describing a similar experience to Amy's story of Tronc Feuillu and the ochre-coloured boulder. Gill in fact is a similarly mystical figure; witness his commitment and dedication to bouldering as an art form, his unassuming distaste for publicity, and his wonderfully unending quest for form and purity of movement on rock. Talking about Gill and the meditative aspect of his climbing, Yvon Chouinard commented: '...climbing is still in a stage of pure physical movement, and the next is going to be mind control. I think Gill has already gone into that from watching him prepare for a boulder, even in the late '50's. I would walk up to a boulder and just do it. He would sit below a route, do his little breathing exercises...getting his mind calmed down and his body ready to go. You're going to have to use meditation and Yoga to be able to get up some of the new climbs, because pure physical strength or technique are not going to be enough'.

So perhaps Amy's Zen fable is not as fanciful as it may appear. Yet Chouinard's comments worry me, because he implies that Yoga and meditation should be used as a means of increasing achievement, as a way

to enhance technical ability, rather than for spiritual or transcendental purposes. His comments still lie within the normative paradigm, and once again the meaning may be lost. Here the essay must end, for to say more would stretch beyond my competence and be doing what I am implicitly arguing against. But let me briefly restate the argument. Leading (or soloing) the crux of a climb near the limit of our ability provides us with 'rock – climbing's quintessential paradigm case.' This is where it's at: And it is here that the essential qualities of the sport are most clearly etched. Modern rock-climbing values individual achievement, rationally and increasing technical competence. These emphases, which reflect contemporary societal norms, ignore the emotional and spiritual context in which we are inevitably grounded, and also perhaps the reality that we individually experience. Viewing climbing as an activity that transcends technical ability, that acts in concert with nature (external and our own), that seeks to subjugate the self, and that combines our essence with the essence of our art, produces values of a difference and more lasting quality. We are fortunate that climbing is an activity that allows us to dig deep, to have the experience and to own the meaning: it is a pity if we do not use it in that way.