



Selfless Climbing versus Ego Climbing, by Robert Pirsig

Phaedrus wrote a letter from India about a pilgrimage to holy Mount Kailas, the source of the Ganges and the abode of Shiva, high in the Himalayas, in the company of a holy man and his adherents.

He 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 of 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 this 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 what a difference! The ego-climber is like an instrument that's out of adjustment. He puts his foot down an instant too soon or too late. He's likely to miss a beautiful passage of sunlight through the trees. He goes on when the sloppiness of his step shows he's tired. He rests at odd times. He looks up the trail trying to see what's ahead even when he knows what's ahead because he just looked a second before. He goes too fast or too slow for the conditions and when he talks his talk is forever about somewhere else, something else. He's here but he's not here. He rejects the here, is unhappy with it, wants to be farther up the trail but when he gets there will be just as unhappy because then it will be "here." What he's looking for, what he wants, is all around him, but he doesn't want that because it is not all around him. Every step's an effort, both physically and spiritually, because he imagines his goal to be external and distant.

Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*

