



AAC Publications

The Alchemy of Action

By Doug Robinson

The Alchemy of Action. Doug Robinson. Moving Over Stone, 2013. 188 pages. Paperback. \$24.

First, full disclosure: Doug Robinson is an old and good friend. I am a fan of his writing in general and am included in *The Alchemy of Action* as both friend and example/illustration of its premise.

This is a beautifully written, deeply researched, insightful, and groundbreaking contribution to human understanding (and consciousness). It is a great read about climbing, among many other human activities, but it is bigger than that in the same way contemplation from the summit encompasses more than summit-inspired chest thumping.

Because Doug is a climber he poses this question and answer on the front cover:

“Why do people climb mountains?”

“Because it gets us high.”

Well, yes, but it's not adrenaline and it's not just climbing. On the first page of the introduction Doug quotes William Burroughs: “Buddha? A notorious metabolic junky.... Makes his own, you dig? So Buddha says, ‘I’ll metabolize my own junk.... I’ll metabolize a speedball and make with the Fire Sermon.’ While some (not all) devoted, traditional Buddhists might (with good reason) take issue with Burroughs’ inserting speedballs into the Eightfold Noble Path, *The Alchemy of Action* explores such improbable connections and many more. Doug comments, “Buddha’s own speedball is a mixture, a blend, a hormonal cocktail arising from the brain blender when it’s activated by a lot of sweat and bit of fear.”

A lot of sweat and a bit of fear is an apt description of climbing as well as the alchemy of action. This book is for climbers, but it also explores such diverse activities as running, hiking (long distance as well as day treks), skiing in the backcountry, and skiing for speed, and it delves into states of mind as familiar and diverse as depression, euphoria, catatonic exhaustion, and rapture. *The Alchemy of Action* is a well-placed step along the path to answering the question every climber has posed to him/her self, and with which Warren Harding used to greet me nearly every time we met: “Have you figured out yet why we keep doing this?”

Well, yes, because it gets us high. But it's not exactly the first kind of high that comes to mind. You can't buy it on the street. To paraphrase Burroughs' description of Buddha, we metabolize our own junk within ourselves with nothing more than a balanced mixture of sweat and fear. That oversimplifies the more complicated reality contained in a definition of “metabolism: n. 1. The

chemical processes occurring within a living cell or organism that are necessary for the maintenance of life. In metabolism some substances are broken down to yield energy for vital processes while other substances, necessary for life, are synthesized.”

Energy for vital processes necessary for life is a topic worth understanding by every climber, and Robinson has expended an enormous quantity (and quality) of his own energy to help us with that effort.

One of my favorite sections of the book involves, of all people, Roger Bannister. It begins, “A funny thing happened on the way to the four-minute mile. In the spring of 1954 Roger Bannister was in the best shape of his life, running so well. But he had stalled out. He was stale, maybe overtrained.... His body was bored and his mind had gone flat.” He and his training buddy Chris Brasher needed a change, so they went to Scotland for four days of climbing. It was a risk, and Brasher even took a leader fall, but they returned to their training refreshed in mind and spirit, and a few weeks later Bannister ran the first sub-four-minute mile, 3:59.4 on May 6, 1954. Robinson writes, “Roger Bannister’s climbing interlude...was the perfect thing, just the right antidote to padding around and around. Dizzily around. An endless, droning slave to the inside track. Which actually wasn’t quite dizzying enough; only driving him deeper into his own rut. So it became necessary, essential even, to revert to wildness to get the juices flowing again.”

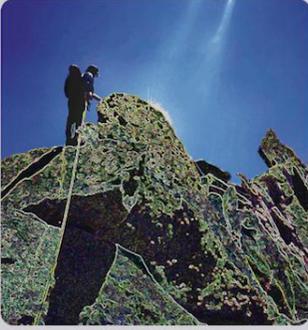
Metabolically speaking.

Sixty years later Bannister wrote, “The urge to struggle lies latent in everyone. The more restrictive our society and work become, the more necessary it will be to find some outlet for this craving for freedom....We run, not because we think it is doing us good, but because we enjoy it and cannot help ourselves.”

With *The Alchemy of Action*, Doug Robinson helps us understand that enjoyment and how we can help ourselves. Thanks, Doug.

Dick Dorworth

Images



THE ALCHEMY OF ACTION DOUG ROBINSON

Why do people climb mountains?
Because it gets us high.
But adrenaline junkies we are not,
and beta-endorphin isn't behind runner's high either.
The surprising answer reveals natural psychedelic transformations
at work deep in the brains of adventure athletes.

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