

Chapter 12

A Different Type of Walking



Walking was now much less of an effort. No longer were they trying to get from here to there over a difficult terrain. It was as if every step was simply an opportunity to let the earth turn under their feet. All that was necessary was to lift oneself out of the way and let the motion happen beneath them. Having developed a clear awareness of their surroundings, moving through it was now almost as easy as being in one's own body. It was as if they were walking mostly on air.

The exercise described in this chapter represents a synthesis of various practices and inspirations. Its formation began when I read an account of *lung-gom-pa* walkers or runners in Lama Govinda's classic account of his travels in mid-20th century Tibet in his book *The Way of the White Clouds*. Govinda describes observing Tibetan practitioners who were able to walk or run great distances for long periods of time without tiring. He describes their metered gait and fierce concentration, that these runners should not be interrupted. The description is intriguing, but even according to Govinda's own account he was never able to fully grasp how the practice was conducted or what the training entailed.

A second inspiration arose from a presentation that I once heard Alan Ginsburg

make. At one point during his presentation, Alan described a simple meditation practice that he had been given by the Tibetan lama Chogyam Trungpa many years earlier. The meditation involves a breathing exercise in which one imagines the out-breath circling the entire world until it touches the back of one's head, and, upon inhalation, the process is reversed until the air reenters the lungs. There was an element of the practice through which I was reminded of a Projective Geometry imagination of a line intersecting a plane at infinity. This became the third inspiration.

In a projective geometric picture of space, a line intersects a plane at infinity by moving away from an initial point in any direction. If the point is directly in front of you, we can imagine moving to the plane at infinity by traveling infinitely far toward the left or right. In the projective geometric system, moving left or right meets the same infinitely large plane, infinitely far away. Thus I see a single line as being continuous even if I move beyond the plane of infinity. To begin to imagine this, if I move to the left infinitely, I meet a point at the plane at infinity and if I continue beyond the infinite, I begin to return back toward myself, only now, from the right hand side.

A final inspiration came from the idea of countermovement, which is present in all motion. I was introduced to this in the writings of Viktor Schauberger, the Austrian naturalist, who was inspired deeply by observing nature, and especially moving water. I later spoke about this countermovement again in a conversation I had with Jaiman McMillian, the head of the Spatial Dynamics Institute in Mechanicville, NY. Countermovement is the concept that as a physical material or force moves in one direction, there is a corresponding movement or activity in the opposite direction. This is not necessarily apparent on first inspection. For example, if I wish to raise my body from a chair, I must first push down to create the countermovement up. Another example can be seen in electrochemistry, where the physical deposition of one material out of a solution is balanced with an electrical effect that is simultaneously and invisibly produced.

The seemingly unrelated imaginations and experiences described above were semiconsciously working in me for a while. Then one day they began to come together in an unexpected way. Most of my summers and spare time are spent in a small rustic cabin on a ridge in the Adirondack Mountains. It is a two and a half mile walk to town along a very scenic and pleasant dirt road. The road itself is rather steep, and climbs almost eight-hundred feet in the last one and a quarter miles on the return trip. I found that this was often a somewhat tiring experience, and on this particular day I recalled the image of the *lung-gom-pa* runners I read about in *The Way of the White Clouds*. I thought it might be possible to develop some type of mental activity for getting up the mountain more easily. The exercise that resulted is described as follows.

Exercise #8

Begin by walking at a rate between a regular and brisk pace on a flat surface. Become aware of your breath as it leaves and reenters your body. Begin to visualize that as the air exits your body it continues outward so far that it travels all the way around the world and just touches the back of your head. Visualize that the air that circles the globe and touches the back of your head actually pushes you forward. Now, as you have fully breathed out, visualize that the air settles for a single instant down the back of your head and then immediately begins its journey back around the world as you begin to inhale. Visualize that as you inhale you are essentially grasping the breath and pulling on it as if it were a rope, and use it to pull you forward. At the end of the in-breath, visualize that the air stream ends by being fully pulled into your body. Begin the out-breath and associated imagination again. Do not try to slow down your breathing or breathe larger or smaller amounts of air. The key is not to change your breathing, but to work with the imagination of the countermovement created by the visualization of your breath circling the globe (or going through infinity in the sense of a projective geometry exercise) and then have it return into your body. If you can visualize its pattern, it creates an elongated lemniscate form. Follow the out-breath infinitely far around the earth – to the back of the head – down along the back of the head – breathe back in and feel the breath return back around the world toward the body – in-breath – back in to the body – down into the body – back up – out-breath, etc. It is also very helpful to shift your focus from a point-centered one, to one where you see the peripheral whole. With a bit of practice, a rhythm will begin. The breath out and imagination of moving out propel you forward. After a moment of stillness (your breath imagined to be touching the back of your head), the breath is drawn inward, and you feeling as if you are pulling on a rope (your breath) and moving forward.

Commentary on Exercise #8

Experiencing the exercise described above, I have found that it is possible to keep walking up a steep grade of road in the mountains with no additional effort or fatigue. Even my breathing rate is constant as if it were flat or only slightly hilly, although much greater concentration is needed as it becomes steeper. I have also found that one can use this technique successfully paddling a canoe or kayak.

On one occasion while going up the steepest section of road (almost a half mile long) and practicing this technique, I noted a neighbor ahead near the side of the road doing some work. Realizing that it would be a bit strange to walk by without greeting him, I arrived at the top of the hill, let go of the visualization, (let go of the peripheral consciousness and awareness of my breath moving in and out) and greeted my neighbor. A conversation arose and we spoke for almost three minutes. I noticed that though I had walked up the hill very quickly, I was not out of breath!

An additional technique that I have found to be useful when walking up the hills using this method involves the periphery focus. When using the periphery focus, it is possible to really work your imagination and visualize the road as flat, not uphill. I have often found that in the instant that I am successful, the strain of walking uphill disappears immediately. It is as if I am walking on flat ground. Related to this visualization, I have also had the experience that I am simply lifting my feet and the ground moves forward under them.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that hills do not require effort to walk up, or that it is simply a case of mind over matter. However, as we begin to make progress on overcoming a fixed material conception of the world, other possibilities of being emerge, and it becomes possible to be in and move through the world in a new manner.*

*Eurythmy, as developed by Rudolph Steiner in the early 20th Century, as well as Jaimen McMillan's work through the Spacial Dynamics Institute and its programs, offer many more possibilities of moving through the world in a new manner.