

## A Mountain of Support

The mountain that asks me to climb “her” is a hearty climb - about six miles up and six miles down or as they say here in Japan, 9 or 10 kilometers one way. My thoughts about climbing this majestic, snow-capped mountain are conflicted. A part of me anticipates the adventure and relishes in the sense of accomplishment I will have after I have done it. Another part fears I may not get back down before dark and that I will spend the night alone and lost on the mountain. Still another part fears failure – it says I lack the stamina to get to the top.

Stamina is an issue given that my tight groin muscles have kept me from sitting Indian style or rotating my legs in certain ways without excruciating pain for over a year. Plus, my right knee still hurts from a recent shorter trek on this same mountain.

On the day of my ascent, with extra clothes and food packed, I walk to the trail head in about 50 degree temps. Adrenalin excites my body. I see I am the only foreigner on the climb, but I live here now and so I am used to sticking out.

There is stream of climbers ahead of me and behind me. Reflecting on those ahead, I think “This is cool, someone really is forging the way for my journey”. Soon, I am climbing without feeling the work of the climb. My heart opens and I have only gratitude for their path-finding.

When we reach the snow line, most climbers step aside to put on cleats, and quickly rejoin the line of people snaking up the mountain. Not having cleats, I determine to carry on. My confidence soars as I find a rhythm of walking behind those with cleats and concentrating on the person’s feet just ahead of me.

When I stop to rest, I focus on breathing deeply. These short breaks give me fresh energy and cause me to wonder how I breathe when I am just climbing and not watching my breath. Those breaks also give me time to study the faces of those walking by. I feel a definite kinship with them even though I do not know their names and there is little to say.

In time, a smile or a thumbs up becomes the way to say “hi” and encourage each other. The bonding is palpable. Feeling the support, my walking develops a confident beat and my feet and body feel more fluid as I continue the ascent. The climbing becomes even easier after I purchase cleats at the noodle lunch place.

An unexpected slide in the snow leaves me a bit unsure of what happened and yet aware that my tight groin muscle has cracked. I know that I have slid down a particularly slippery steep slope where most climbers cling tightly to established rope lines on my bottom. I remember that people laughing and cheering me on as they heard my “Woooo, who” when I quickly passed them by. When

someone with enough English hollered “Do it again”, I did because by then I knew that sliding on my bottom was easier than negotiating each step for a more controlled and dignified descent. When another man tried my bottom descent technique, I smiled, feeling confirmed by my unnamed friends.

There were other falls that day – at least another five more and one that left me with my leg stuck in a hole. It intrigued me that each mishap required that I use my newly cracked muscle to free myself and get moving again.

Late in the afternoon when my knees let me know in no uncertain terms they did not want to twist around all the big rocks and boulders any more, my panic about “what if it gets dark and I am the last one on the mountain” returned. But as soon as those thoughts came, so did two girls. They smiled warmly as I joined them. Noting that the sun was still lower in the sky, I was grateful not to be alone. With gestures and just a few words, I understood that one of the girls had hurt her back and so we helped each other down the last stretch of the mountain

Resting at the bottom of this awesome mountain was nothing short of amazing. I saw that my climb was not about me pushing past my pain and resistance so much as it was about me having had my every need met. When I ran short on water, my silent prayer for water brought two women offering me a bottle of water within minutes. At another rest stop, a man had offered me a ginseng drink, a gift I readily accepted, knowing it was full of healing energy. I got the cleats I needed. My tight and nearly frozen leg muscles were stretched and freed in ways no chiropractor could have done. When my panicky thoughts came, two girls joined me to finish the trip down.

That night the discomfort of my sore and tired body paled as I realized that my left leg was now entirely pain-free – something I had not known in over a year. I knew then that the “mountain” of support I had received was about much more than climbing “her”. “She”, my fellow climbers and I had co-created a greater reality – a reality that was greater than letting go of leg pain or letting go of my fear-based struggles. It was about becoming the understanding of the mountain and those who climb “her”. It was not so much going up the mountain as it was climbing with “her” to the sky, or the Native Americans would say – the way is not so much about walking on the land, as it is about walking with the land.