



## The Alchemy of Action

Doug Robinson

*Moving Over Stone, 2013, pp210, US\$24*

There's a passage you may know from Yvon Chouinard. He's on the seventh and penultimate day on El Cap's Muir Wall, forging a new route with T M Herbert. The unremitting effort has left them pretty spaced out.

'With the more receptive senses we now appreciated everything around us,' Chouinard wrote. 'Each individual crystal in the granite stood out in bold relief. The varied shapes of the clouds never ceased to attract our attention. For the first time we noticed tiny bugs that were all over the walls, so tiny

they were barely noticeable... This unity with our joyous surroundings, this ultra penetrating perception gave us a feeling of contentment that we had not had for years.'<sup>3</sup>

I hope you've experienced such moments of clarity and calm in the mountains yourself. It's a big part of why we go there; well, it is for me, even if I push myself nowhere near so hard as Chouinard and Herbert.

But what's going on here? What brings about this enhanced state of awareness, of being, even? Doug Robinson has been turning over this question for most of a long and active mountain life. He had a strong hunch back in the 1960s when the sub-cultures of Haight-Ashbury and climbing coalesced in Yosemite. LSD was the catalyst as climbers at Camp 4 enacted Timothy Leary's memorable dictum: 'Turn on, tune in, drop out.'

Robinson soon realized that the chemically induced state of mind he derived from LSD and marijuana was eerily like the one that arose spontaneously out of the intensity of his life on the Valley's granite walls. As he put in a seminal essay, 'The Climber as Visionary', published in 1969 in *Ascent*, climbing and its attendant fear 'produces a chemical climate in the body that is conducive to visionary experience'.

The idea sounded plausible – not dissimilar to the visionary states induced by mystics through fasting or other extreme austerities – but at the time might best have been described as well-founded speculation. With *The Alchemy of Action*, Robinson brings us up to date. Neuroscience has moved on dramatically in recent years and the old 'metabolic voyager' thinks his case is now all but proved. So do I.

Actually Robinson is only just ahead of the curve with *Alchemy*. After suffering under decades of repressive legislation, research into psychedelic drugs is enjoying a productive renaissance. You can hardly open a weekend supplement these days without reading of the wonders of ayahuasca or the potential of LSD to treat obsessive-compulsive disorder or alleviate the

3. 'Muir Wall – El Capitan', Yvon Chouinard, *American Alpine Journal* 1966, pp46-51

anxiety of the dying. Professor David Nutt, the government's former drugs tsar, told *The Independent*<sup>4</sup> that people on a psychedelic trip often experience being at one with the world, or even with the universe. The fear of dying subsides as the sense of self breaks down. They exist beyond their body. That experience can give them a sense of perpetuity, of being permanent, of being part of the cycle of life, which of course we all are.

How can such a sane and humane person have been selected by ministers as their chief policy advisor of drugs? Unsurprisingly, Prof Nutt was sacked in 2009 after saying ecstasy, cannabis and LSD were less dangerous than alcohol and tobacco.

What has all this science got to do with climbing? Well, Robinson sees it as an answer to the 'why?' question. Why climb mountains? Simple! Because it gets us high.

Answering the 'how?' question is more complicated. In fact it becomes so complicated that well into *Alchemy* Robinson suggests that less engaged readers skip the 'dense' chapters on brain chemistry and jump straight to his wrap-up. But I advise you to stick with it. It's your brain after all. And if as you gulp at the sketchy nature of that barely-in-reach hold your life is going to depend upon, it's fascinating to know that your brain is at that moment releasing a mix of chemicals, including a tiny shot of DMT (dimethyltryptamine), one of the most fiercely potent psychedelics known to man. Thus fortified, you will cruise the move. And you will feel great! (Let's hope so anyway.) Another good reason to stick with it through every page of *Alchemy* is that however many authoritative tracts you might read on this subject, nobody will tell it in such a zany, folksy way as Doug Robinson.

*Alchemy* is a joyous trip, guided by a knowing roshi who blends the insight of Aldous Huxley (much referenced) and the romance of John Muir with the vernacular of The Dude in *The Big Lebowski*. Take the following breakdown of the brain juices that flow when we're out on the edge. (Climbing, ski-mountaineering, running: Robinson loves them all.)

'Start with noradrenaline. Alert, alive. It's what your Starbucks or your Red Bull turns into inside your head...'

Now add dopamine, pleasure itself. Mr Feelgood. And of course sultry Ms Feelgood too. The dopamine molecule is a close relative of noradrenaline. They are essentially sisters, trading outfit and maybe flirting with the same boys...

Another relative, serotonin, joins the mix. This cousin is pretty familiar too, and runs with a lot of the same brain enzymes...'

And so it jives on. The three hormones above are well studied and acknowledged. But then Robinson adds two more ingredients to the cocktail... 'the fizzy stuff that goes in with a flourish at the end, just before the wedge of lime and, of course, a tiny umbrella.'

The first is anandamide, the human hormone that mimics marijuana, but stronger. Anandamide is now the researchers' hormone of choice for

4. 'Why I think the terminally ill should take LSD', *The Independent*, 7 March 2015

explaining 'runner's high', superceding beta-endorphin which in retrospect seems to have been way over-hyped as a candidate. Anandamide by itself could easily account for climber's euphoria, indeed for the remarkable enriching of consciousness attending all our edgier games. (Before you slip into your trainers and dash round the block to generate a shot of this stuff, bear in mind that to achieve an anandamide high you'll have to run hard for at least 50 minutes.)

Finally comes DMT, made not in the lab or ingested as ayahuasca, cooked up from the caapi vine and other plants, but generated naturally in the brain. Robinson is running a bit ahead of scientific agreement here, but that's part of the book's excitement. He contends that in the right circumstances – 'heady times where a dash of fear blends into high human function – a drop of this wickedly strong, but entirely organic, substance gets released into the brain, 'adding a jolt of Technicolor to the rewards of playing on the edge'.

So that's the hormone cocktail that Robinson believes hooks us in. There is plenty about LSD and other mind-bending chemicals in *Alchemy*; indeed the book might as well be Paisley-patterned so rich is its portrait of the 1960s – cue walk-on parts for *The Grateful Dead*, Gary Snyder, Joni Mitchell and more, and of course a bigger part for the Haight alchemist himself, Owsley Stanley. When customers complained to Owsley that his acid had dished them a nightmare, his standard reply was: 'Aww, man, you shoulda taken half!'

Robinson, however, is not advocating we trip out on LSD all over again. He's mellowed and gone organic. Far better the naturally occurring psychedelics like DMT cooked up in our brains on steep rock or as skis turn towards the fall line. No more overdose, instead a more subtle, threshold dose.

Climbing is a physical meditation, Robinson believes. If your brain delivers an organic high with freshly altered perceptions, then revel in them. 'What could be better than to be awash in the beauty of life rather than tripping out beyond it?'

Owsley Stanley is history. With this stimulating and original book it is now Doug Robinson who is the alchemist, turning wit, words and dedicated personal research to wisdom. And as he says of the hormonal cocktail served up on the edge: How could you resist?

Stephen Goodwin

- *The Alchemy of Action* can be bought via the website [movingoverstone.com](http://movingoverstone.com)