

A Meditation

Snow, water and a warm, spring day

BY ANDY SELTERS

Today I'll go up alone. It's spring. The snow is dwindling, safe and reliable, and I will head up a nearby mountain and schuss back down.

In general, these sorts of mountaineering games are about expansion, taking myself beyond the norm. Today, though, I'm not looking to expand my descent list. The sky, snow and slope are familiar enough that this is not an adventure into uncertainty. It's an exercise, a practice, and a meditation.

I stretch the skins onto the skis, rub sun cream onto cheeks and ears, flick up the heel risers and work my legs up the slope. The dawn snow is still a scratchy pavement. Patches of earth and leaves are showing through. The mantle of winter is on its way out, a percentage more every day. When the sun starts melting the surface into slurry, it'll be time to ride back down.

There were days when I would do these spring circuits and feel like I'd conquered something. Five hundred wiggles along a line down a big mountain, and, hey, that's something that an urban eye can marvel at. But a score of springs have tired that game out of me, and today the spirit of expansion calls for a more limitless attitude.

Today I'm engaging a deeper essence, alone with the snow. It's about the basics of taking my life onto the earth and into the sky. It's about expanding into the space above to see what comes down.

Today my instinct is to ask, what is this snow? So many

vectors in the Eastern Sierra point to water, and I want to go where my thoughts will roam the sky. I want to see if the snow will reveal how it goes from a base for skiing to everyone's water.

The same stuff that filled the skies with mist in December, swirled over the peaks as powder in January, and hung in icicles off the cliffs in March is now a tenacious crust of crystals that by lunchtime will start to fill streams, nourish roots, and rise toward leaves.

Far below in the Owens Valley, I can trace the artery that bleeds this elixir of existence toward that big ganglion of human frenzy far to the south.

A couple of hours and 3,000 feet up, I stop and guzzle water from my bottle. Then I refill it with snow that the sun on my pack will turn to liquid before my next stop. Already the surface is soft enough for my hand to sweep up some slurry. Better get going, resume the methodical push: ski slide, pole place, ski slide, up.

This stuff under my skis is the original mystical compound, the most dynamic and taken-for-granted substance we know of. Eons ago, it became the basis for the only life that we can imagine: the most universal component of all the membranes, lubricants, metabolites and messengers in my climbing body.

Infused with soul, the same molecules have no doubt been the moisture in a kiss, as well as the blood on a battlefield.

Assigning it a name was our original mistake. Water is infinitely more than just water. With no taste or smell of its own, it's

Spellbinder of Bishop

n the mountains

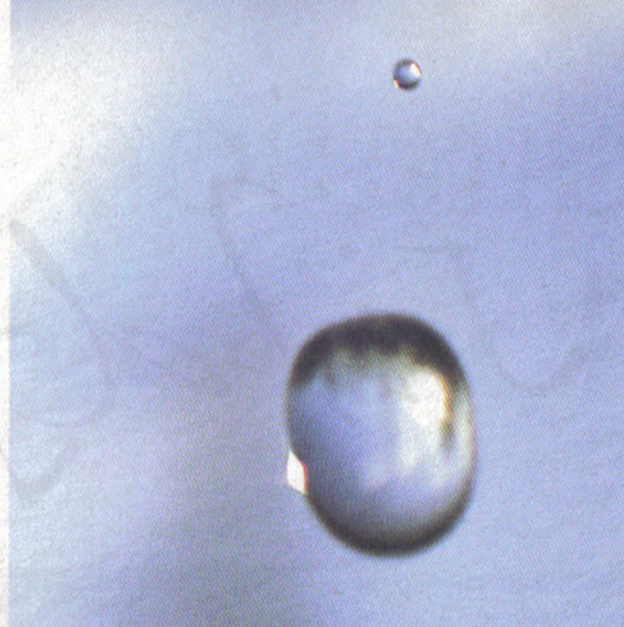
also much less than we can imagine. It's the essence that simultaneously, around the world, is too rare, too plentiful, and, only with endless management, occasionally the right amount. The water we can point to is never the substance that is.

Another hour and a half and I gain the ridge; it is not much further to the top. Now I can look over new mountains, invisible from anywhere but up high—the High Sierra belt, the west side. These lofty cirques and basins feed the San Joaquin River.

Through satellite telemetry and surveys on skis and snowcat, the white blanket here is one of the most scrutinized snowpacks in the world. For in the haze farther west sits the most valuable agricultural valley in the world.

From up here, the lowland networks of freeways and work stations are just a rumor. Down there, where the primal conditions for life are temperate and easy, strife and pollution are the norm. Up here, where life is a struggle, I pull off my sweaty shirt, sit back on a warm summit rock, and drink from my bottle of snowmelt.

I'd love to say I'm not of that world down there. I wish I could say that's not me. No way will I commute on the 405; no way will I work with a goal of spending a day at the mall. But I'd be lying to say I have no business there. I rip the wrapping off of a nutrition bar and chew it with gusto. Calorie deficit looms



no matter how much I eat today.

Just what is this water—both the snowpack and the essence of this backcountry seeker—doing up here? It's carrying messages between Heaven and Earth. The water that evaporated into the sky, built into

clouds and now rests as snow left behind all of its salts and enzymes and most of its impurities, and settled here on the peaks.

It's gone through this cycle a zillion times. In those cycles it's coursed through a zillion living creatures, and after an infinite number of circuits, it has infused its message into us: up high, on the peaks, in the sky; where you go to find renewal.

Where else might we have gotten our universal regard for mountains, except from the substance within us that's made the journey up again and again?

Where else might we have gotten the ideal of living fully on our life's path, except from the substance that's flowed downhill again and again, nourishing all things on its way?

Timing is everything, and it's time to go. Rip off the skins, flick down the heel risers, point the skis down. One more swig of water before I'm off.

Swish, arc, swish, carve. A cool skin of sweat evaporates in the breeze as I follow the downhill slopes, fast and sure, tracing the timeless path of water. 