

THE MIDDLE WAY

Journal of the Buddhist Society



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FULL COLOUR CENTRE SPREAD: KAILASH MANDALA
photographs by Brian Beresford, Sean Jones & Richard Gayer

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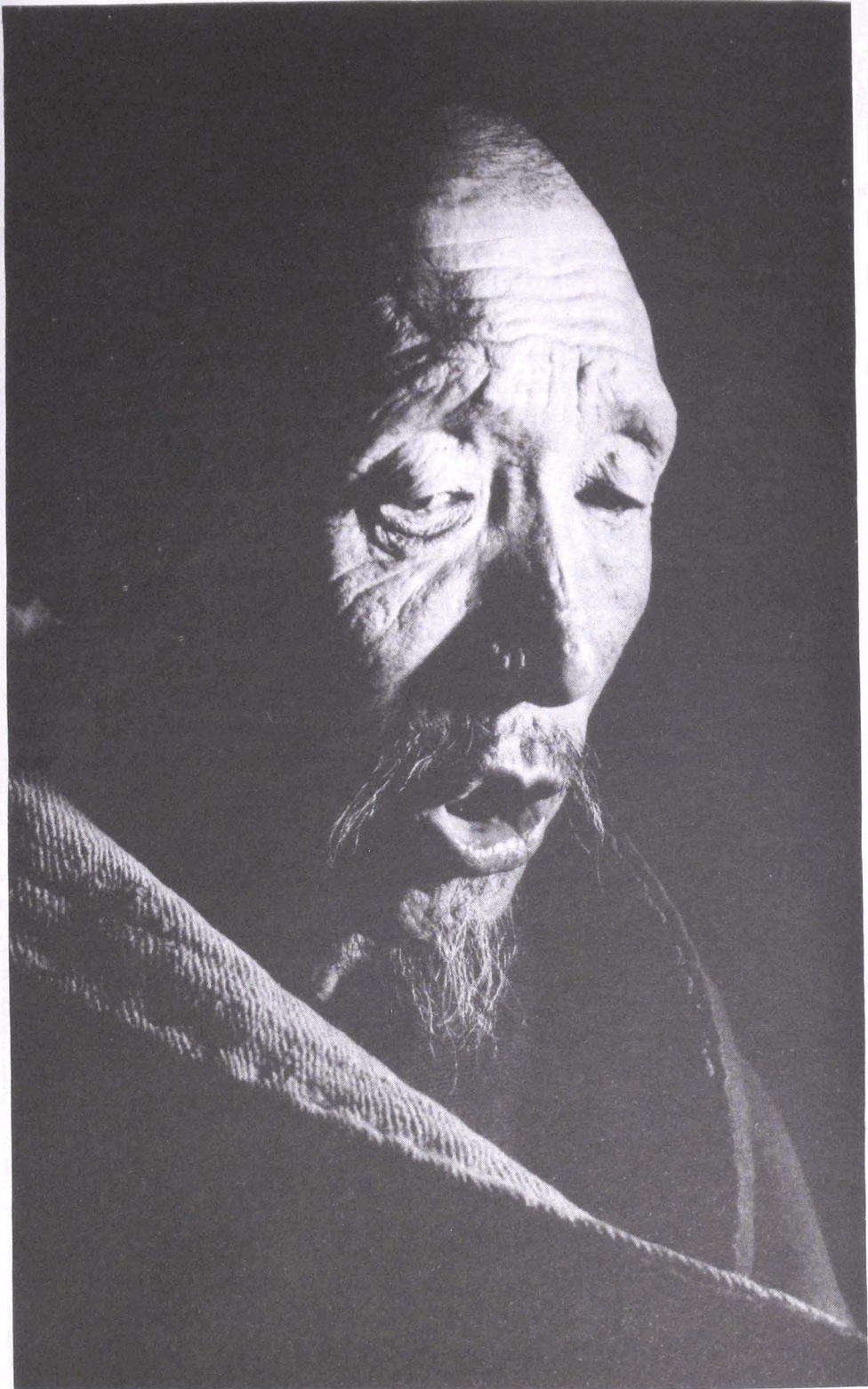
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A lama at one of the Tantric Colleges in Lhasa chanting a blessing on Brian Beresford's pilgrimage to Mount Kailash — see opposite.



Pilgrimage to Mount Kailash

by Brian Beresford

FOREWORD: The bronze relief above, now in Zürich, shows the sacred Mt. Kailash in western Tibet, its circumambulation route, monasteries (now mostly gone) and auspicious sites. On the summit of the uncannily symmetrical peak sits the victorious Milarepa, who won the mountain for Buddhism in a contest of magic with a shaman-priest of the old religion of Tibet, the Bön. Known in Tibetan as Gang Rinpoche ('Precious Snow Peak') or simply Ti-se ('Pinnacle'), this is arguably the most sacred mountain in the world. It is revered by Hindus, Jains and Bön-po as well as by Buddhists. Four of the great rivers of India arise in its environs, and mythologically it has been latterly associated with Mt. Meru, the axial or central mountain of classical Indian cosmology. Because of its extreme remoteness, few Westerners have been there. Brian Beresford tells how he and his friends Sean Jones, Daniel

PILGRIMAGE TO MOUNT KAILASH

Adams and Richard Gayer made the holy parikrama or circuit of this magnificent peak in 1986.

“**I**t has been terrible!” the lone Hindu told me. He was very oddly dressed: pink woollen balaclava under white plastic trilby, puffy down jacket — and a *dhoti*. “We have been all night standing up in a blizzard. I cannot go on . . . Forty-five miles in such conditions! Today I have seen a helicopter, so perhaps my companions will be saved. Anyway, I am wishing you good luck . . .” And with that he stumbled up to the cairn of stones and prayer-flags that marked the entrance to the western valley, where the circumambulation route around this remarkable sacred mountain in Western Tibet begins.

We had been walking westwards for two hours, skirting the foothills that obscure a direct view of the great south face of Kailash. The mountain was now more than ever a mystery for us, since it had also been shrouded in cloud when we drove past it in the jeep on the way from Purang, the ancient Tibetan/Nepalese trading settlement, known as Taklakot to the Indians, which had been our base for two months.

To the left the land fell away to a wide plain cut by a web of rivers running down from the mountain and flowing southwards into the mysterious ‘Demon Lake’ of Rakshas Tal in the distance. On the far side of the lake rose the imposing bulk of Gurla Mandhata (*alt.* 25,355 ft.), a white sleeping giant of a mountain some 3,000 ft. higher than Kailash. Its three peaks spreadeagled in swastika formation formed a perfect counterpoint for the intensely-focussed pinnacle of Kailash. In the far distance, meanwhile, some 50 to 80 miles away, the white tips of the snowy Himalayas protruded like a row of teeth above the rim of the horizon. For the first time in my life I was looking *down* upon those mighty mountains from my 16,000 ft. vantage-point on the great table-top of the Tibetan plateau. No wonder pilgrims had been making the hazardous journey here for 5,000 years. The sheer physical magnificence of the place was enough to create that mingled sense of awe and clarity of being that, paradoxically, arouses both a feeling of mortality — and of immortality.

I bore these emotions with me as I pushed on up the western valley. Since leaving Tarchen, the settlement at the start of the circuit, with my six companions and our convoy of seven yaks tended by two yak-drivers, we had encountered sunshine, rain and sleet. Now, however, it was late afternoon and the landscape was bathed in a golden radiance. On a grassy plain nearby I could see the great flag-pole, the first important point on the circuit: effectively the entrance to the inner sanctum of the mountain. Suddenly, my relaxed mood was shaken: a mass of dense black clouds poured over the ridge above me and, to the accompaniment of rolling thunder, lightning and a biting wind, deluged me with hailstones.

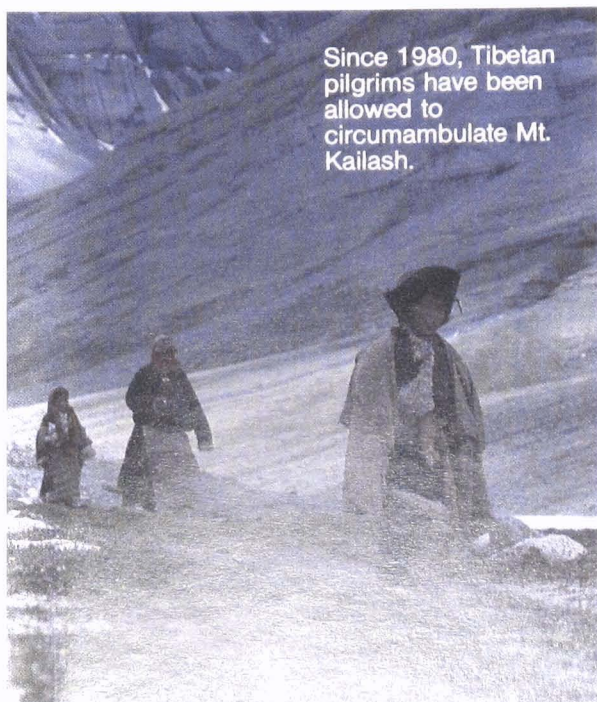
Deafened, I stumbled on — but lost the trail. As the storm abated, I found myself on a ridge made up of flat stones carved with mantras and inscriptions. The hillsides roundabout were blanketed in white ice. I realized that this must be the place where the Buddha was said to have taught the Sutras to 500 arahants. A myth? — perhaps not if one remembers that the trails that wind up to Kailash from the plains of India pass not far from Vaisali and

Kailash Mandala

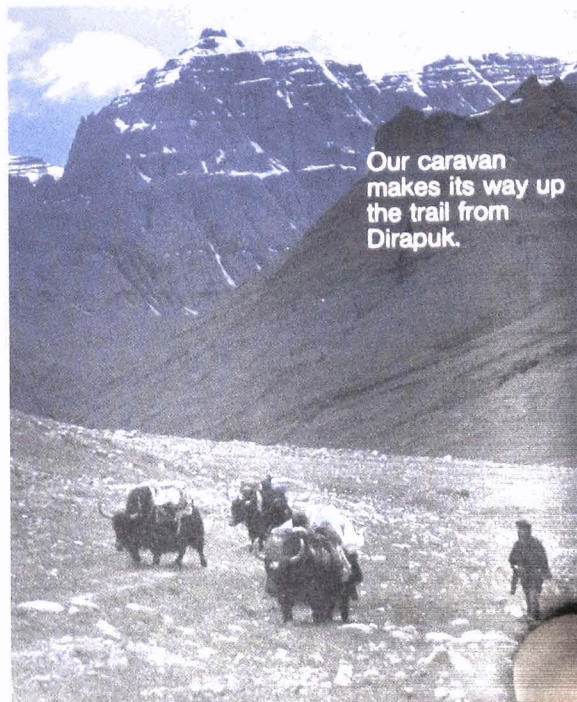
Photographs by Brian Beresford,
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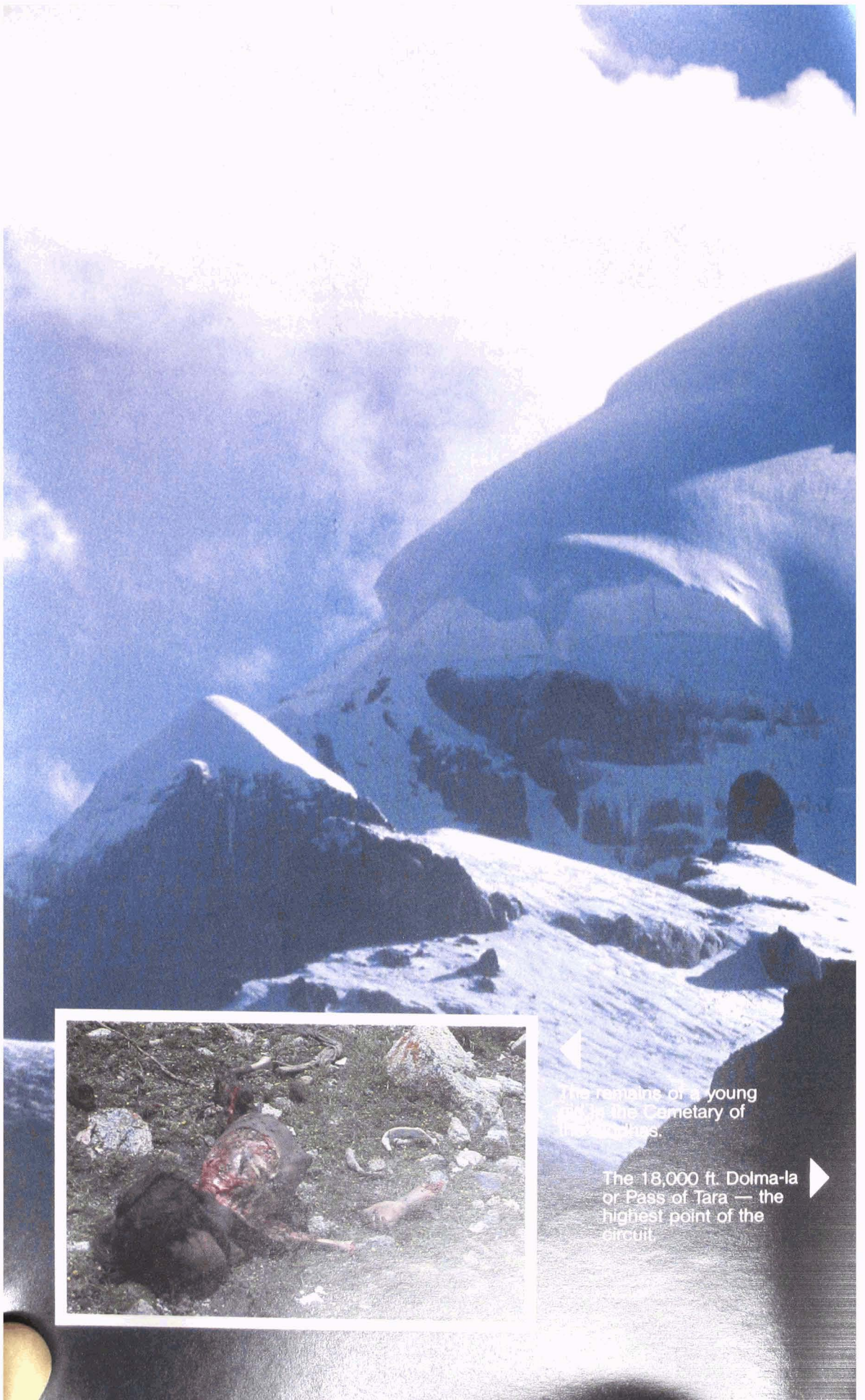
The start of the circuit of Kailash: The imposing Western Valley



Since 1980, Tibetan pilgrims have been allowed to circumambulate Mt. Kailash.



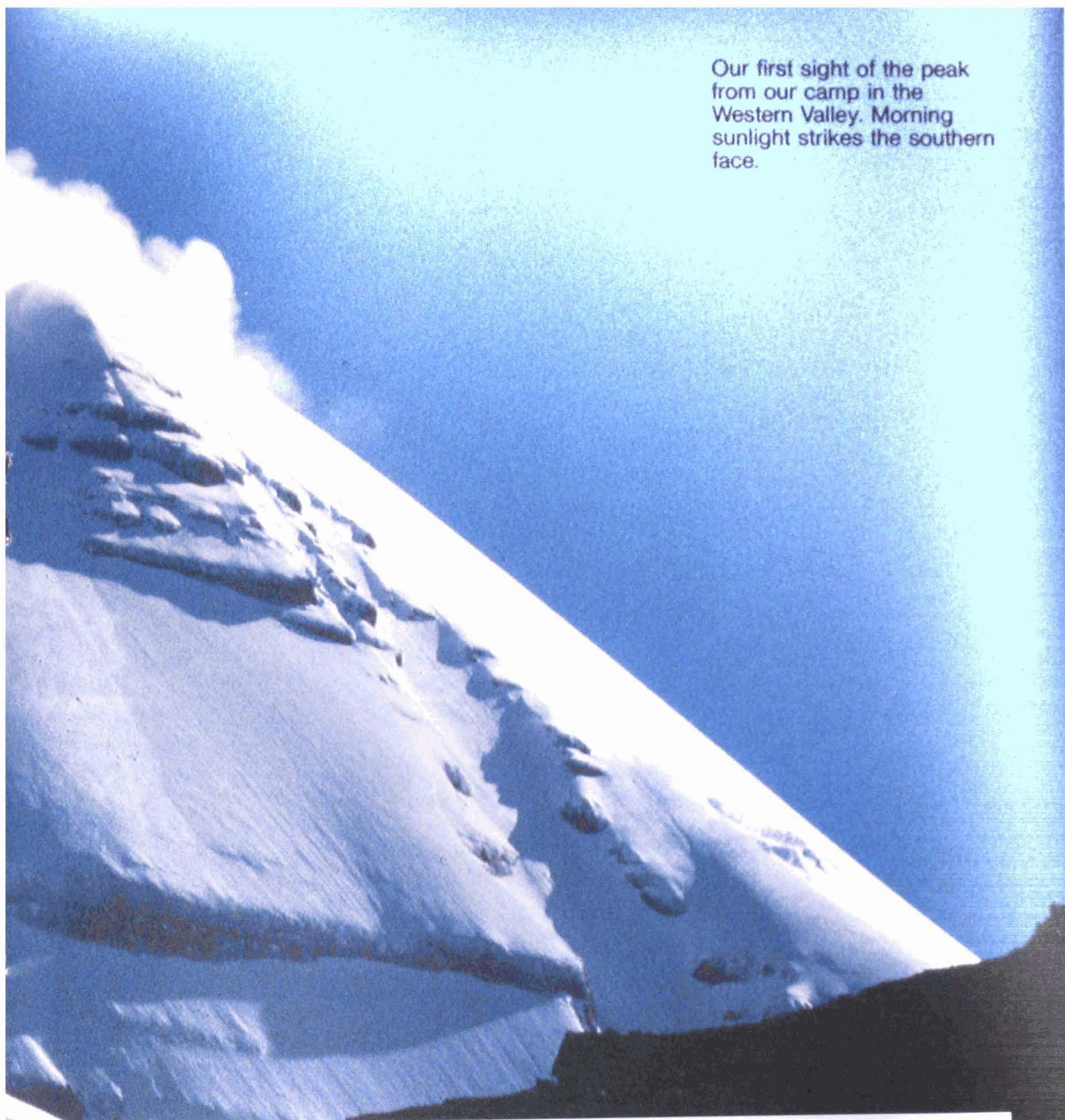
Our caravan makes its way up the trail from Dirapuk.

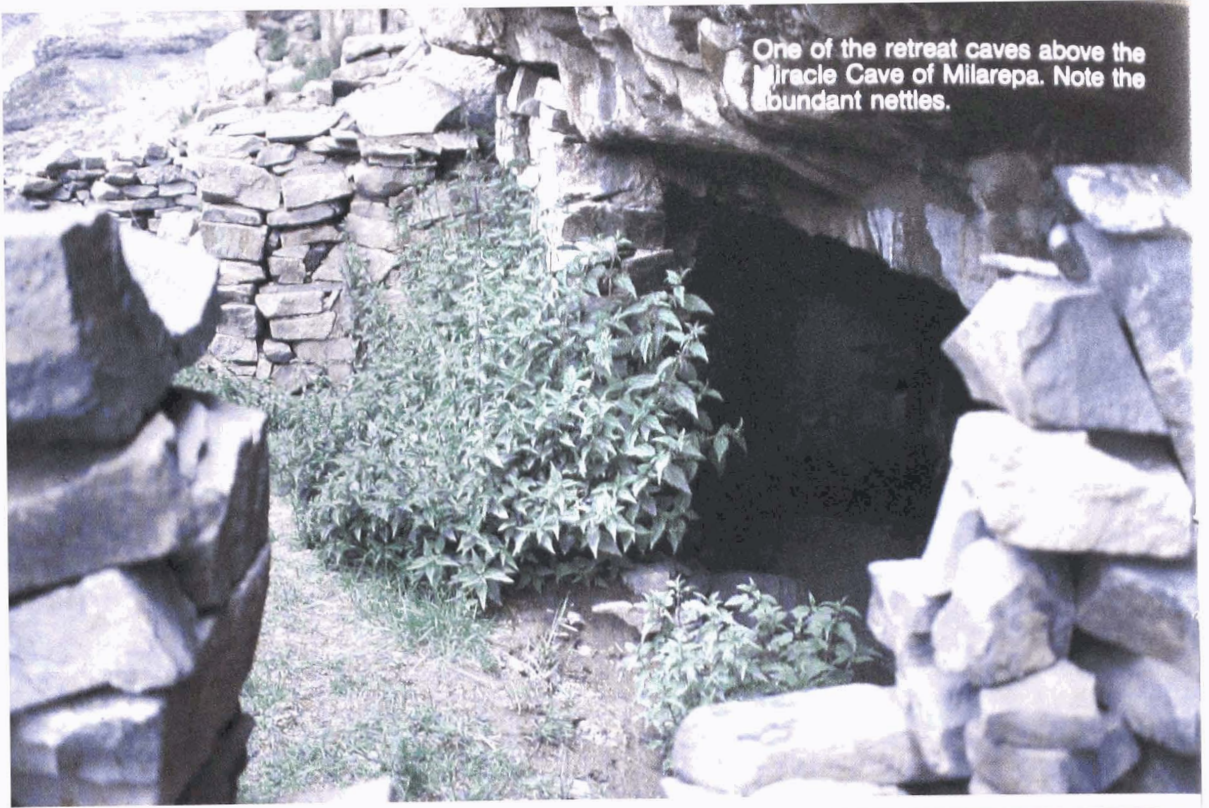


◀ The remains of a young animal in the Cemetery of the Snowflakes.

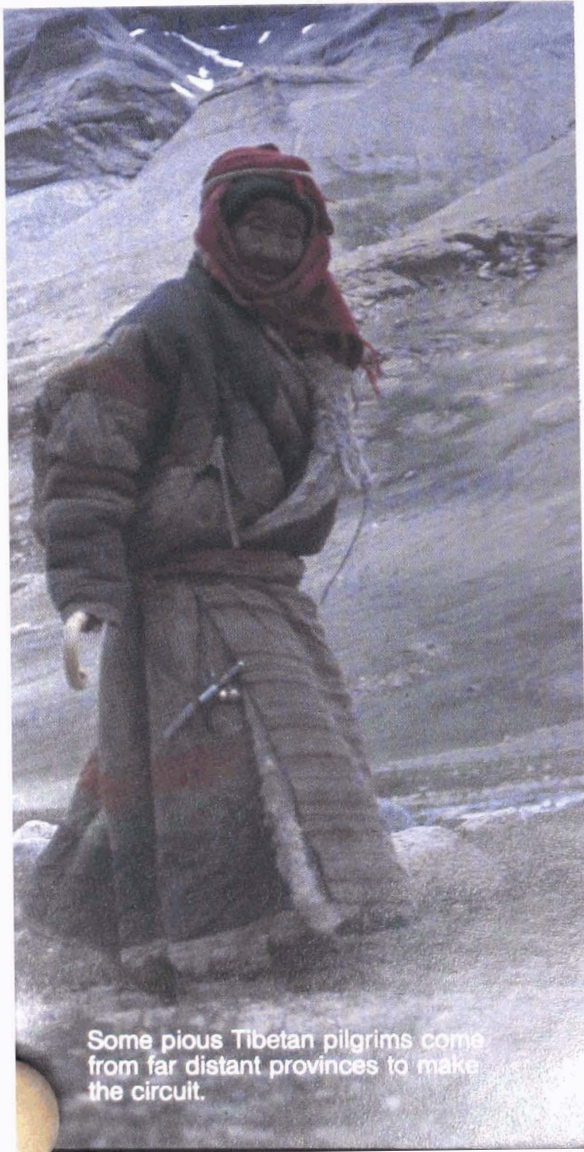
▶ The 18,000 ft. Dolma-la or Pass of Tara — the highest point of the circuit.

Our first sight of the peak
from our camp in the
Western Valley. Morning
sunlight strikes the southern
face.

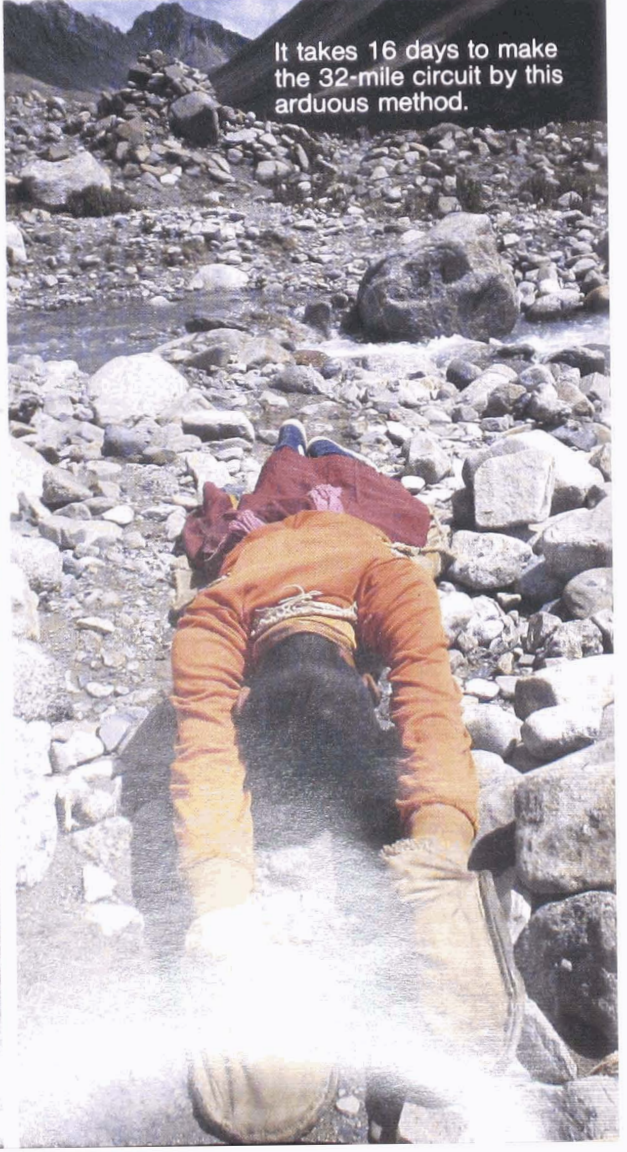




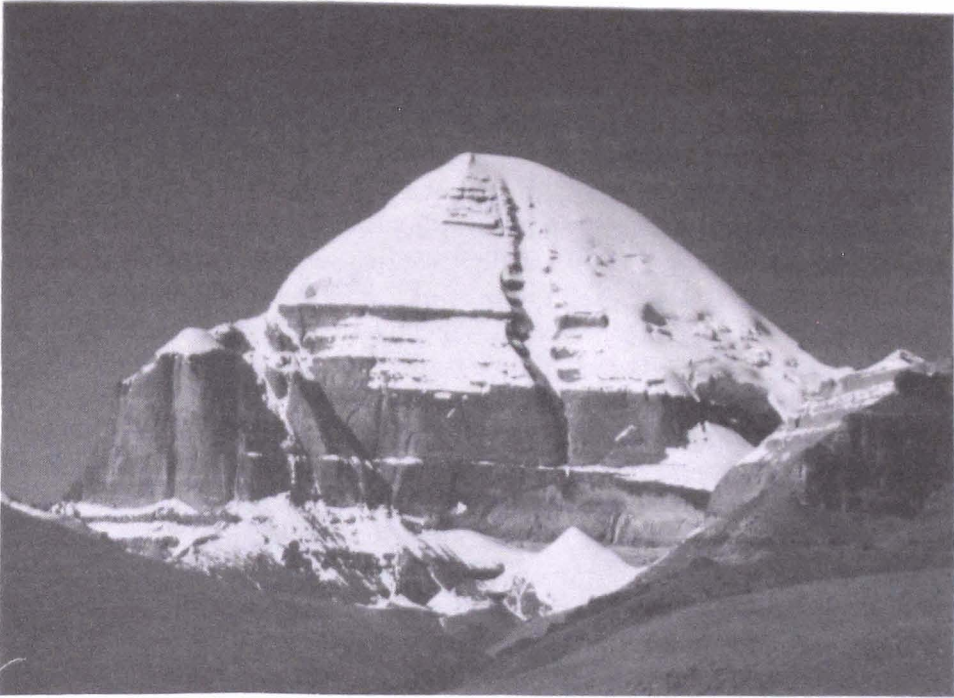
One of the retreat caves above the Miracle Cave of Milarepa. Note the abundant nettles.



Some pious Tibetan pilgrims come from far distant provinces to make the circuit.



It takes 16 days to make the 32-mile circuit by this arduous method.



The southern face of Mt. Kailash

Kushinagara, towns Shakyamuni knew well.

In the distance I could now see our tents being erected alongside a line of desecrated stupas in a wide green valley. Across the river, at the base of huge red cliffs, lay the ruined walls of one of the three monasteries that used to preside over the circumambulation route. Below it I knew was the legendary 'Hidden Elephant Cave': a site associated with Padmasambhava. Cheered, I walked on gratefully into camp to be greeted with a mug of warm tea.

Traditionally, pilgrimage, being an aspect of the archetypal spiritual quest, has involved the component of difficulty: of the overcoming of obstacles. This means having the courage to leave home and all that is familiar in order to make a great leap of faith in the face of unknown dangers. Certainly we had encountered many difficulties on this pilgrimage, but then this was a notoriously difficult place to reach even before the Chinese takeover of Tibet. Only a few stalwart Westerners had succeeded in making it: Sven Hedin, Giuseppe Tucci, Lama Anagarika Govinda. I had been invited along by Daniel Adams, a cameraman from Los Angeles, whom I had met in Ladakh some 10 years earlier. Travelling to Sinkiang from Pakistan, we had hoped to be able to home in on the Kailash area directly from Kashgar, but permission was refused and we had been obliged to go by way of Dunhuang, Amdo and Lhasa, making a gigantic circumambulation of Tibet in the process. For 11 days we had travelled in a 4½-ton clapped-out former Army truck across the great northern plain of Tibet, the notoriously inhospitable Chang Tang — a trip so bad that I wouldn't wish it on anyone. Then at Sinqahe, the new capital of Western Tibet, we had changed into jeeps and Toyota Landcruisers and, given much assistance by the local Chinese authorities, had driven for

PILGRIMAGE TO MOUNT KAILASH

two days along rutted tracks and through swollen streams to Purang. Our bones had been shaken, our patience tested and our resolve pressed to the limit.

That first night in camp at Kailash it rained almost unceasingly; but morning greeted us with blue skies and the great south face of the sacred mountain beaming down at us from above. Our first view of it at last! An immense, pristine dome, with a slight stratification cutting it horizontally and strange vertical indentations like a giant's stairway cut right up its centre to the summit, from which curled a plume of high-altitude vapour.

As we enjoyed a leisurely breakfast, Tibetans intending to make the entire circuit in a single day — the usual time is three days — passed us. Some had come more than 2,000 miles from the provinces of Amdo and Kham, two months' journey away, and would make at least three circuits and perhaps as many as thirteen before returning home.

Inspired by these early-risers, we broke camp and were soon on our way to Dirapuk on the north side of the mountain. My Dharma-brother Sean Jones and I went at a leisurely pace as we wanted to take in the ever-changing but always spectacular views of the mountain. Every now and then it appeared through gaps in the huge pinnacles of rock that form a curtain wall around it, sometimes bathed in sunshine, sometimes enveloped in lugubrious cloud, sometimes lashed by lightning. The weather could be so localized that a person could be soaked while another a few hundred yards away would remain quite dry. The roar of waterfalls cascading down the surrounding cliffs reverberated in our ears, as did the rapids of the Lha-chu, the 'Divine River' that raced through the gorge. Pilgrims and traders passed. We crossed a grassy meadow inhabited by friendly marmots and eventually arrived at our second camp-site where, after eating, we gratefully crashed out.

The next morning I performed a special puja for my teachers, family and friends to give thanks that we had all safely reached this special place. I dedicated a miniature bottle of brandy brought all the way from London to the principles enclosed within the teachings of all the masters of wisdom. In particular, I wished that the present transmission of the Buddha Dharma to the West would continue and lead to an improvement in the state of the world. Afterwards my cameraman, Daniel, and I walked up the steep valley that leads to the imposing north face — a sheer rock wall, some 6,000 ft. high, descending directly from the summit. Shrouded in swirling morning mists, the mountain again hid itself from us.

This detour added an extra 3 or 4 hours to our day. As our next camp-site, at Zutulpuk, was still 12 or 14 hours away, we hurried in the wake of our companions, who had gone on ahead. Although I was now reasonably acclimatized, I found the going very difficult as we climbed towards the Dolma-la or Pass of Tara (c. 18,600 ft.), the highest point on the circuit. I stopped frequently to gulp down great gasps of air, and each time I did so I could feel the energy surging into my body, easing the pain caused by the last few steps and enabling me to stagger on for a few more. The only break we allowed ourselves was at the Mahasiddhas' Cemetery, a site below the pass where pilgrims give up some token of themselves — a lock of hair or an article



The Lake of Compassion (Gauri Kund).

of clothing — to signify non-attachment to the things of this life.

Tantrically, Mount Kailash can be considered as a symbolic manifestation of the Mandala of Chakrasamvara, the Circle of Supreme Bliss or Wheel of Spiritual Commitment (*Tib. 'Khor.lo.bde.mchog* or *'Khor.lo.sdoms.pa*). The 12 arms of Chakrasamvara, the embodiment of compassion, represent the 12 links in the chain of Interdependent Origination. Here at the 11th link in the chain, then, at the northernmost point of the circuit, one was both symbolically, and yet also in a very real physical sense, encountering the experience of death. This was driven home for me by the fact that the torso of a young girl was lying among the debris of discarded articles at the cemetery. We found out later that she had drowned in a river while making the circuit and her family had brought her body here. I struggled on up to the pass and collapsed near the big rock, festooned with prayer-flags and pilgrims' mementoes, that sits on the highest point.

"How do you feel?" Dan asked.

"Dead," was my reply — dead from exhaustion; dead from pain; dead, maybe, from the person who is me. And yet ironically I felt more fully alive that at any other time I can remember.

But there was no time to linger. Having said prayers of thanks to teachers, friends and family, we tumbled down a 2,000 ft. staircase of rocks and boulders, past the turquoise Lake of Compassion (Gauri Kund) and into the gently sloping eastern valley.

If the Pass of Tara was like the link of death and rebirth, the next stage was certainly that of ignorance. Our egotism had lulled us into a false sense of

PILGRIMAGE TO MOUNT KAILASH

invulnerability: that all would be well no matter what. We had seriously misjudged. Before we reached Milarepa's Cave, night closed in without our having caught up with our companions. Wracked with pain, hardly able to see the trail, we crossed a river and then saw a light ahead. We hurried to it only to find young Tibetan pilgrims from Amdo who told us that Zutulpuk was still some 5 hours further on. They kindly offered us a corner of their tiny 2-man tent and we gratefully fell fast asleep.

That night it rained and snowed and we awoke in the blue light of dawn to find ourselves covered by a crisp white mantle. After a salt-tea and barley-flour breakfast, we resumed our journey only to find that we were now on the wrong side of the river. Some kind pilgrims on the other side came over and, linking arms with us, helped us wade across the freezing torrent.

We finally made it to Zutulpuk at midday and found that only two out of the seven members of our party had managed to make camp safely the previous night. Sean had been caught out without any shelter and had spent all night on his feet, dancing to keep awake and warm. Fortunately, there were no casualties — but it was a warning . . .

The 'Miracle Cave' of Milarepa is on the side of a broad expanse of grass. The peak of Kailash is obscured, but the beauty of the view here, with the blue lake of Manasarovar shimmering in the distance, is a peaceful contrast to the scenes of wild grandeur that had gone before. The cave itself has been recently enclosed in a mud-walled shrine that replaces the ruined gompa that was here previously. Legend has it that at Mount Kailash the great yogi had a contest of miraculous powers with a Bön priest named Naro Bon-chung, who in defeat conceded the sacred mountain to Buddhism. Afterwards the association with Chakrasamvara, Milarepa's *yidam*, was forged. The presence of the deity still pervades the sacred mountain and its environs, affording pilgrims the opportunity to enter his *mandala* of sacred power and wisdom.

Thousands of stones carved with *mantras* cover the side of the valley. There are also the remains of many *stupas* blown up by the Communists during the '60s and '70s. Higher up, I was especially intrigued to find ruined meditation cells and caves. They were cleverly fashioned out of hollows in the rock and were very much what I had imagined from the tales of Milarepa that I had read. And as though to clinch the association, nettles — Milarepa's legendary food, which stained his skin its characteristic greenish hue — grew in abundance around the entrance to each cave.

After leaving Zutulpuk, a trek of only 5 hours brought us back to base at Tarchen — back to ordinary consciousness and mundane activities, though enriched immeasurably by the experience, and perhaps also a little more aware of the frailty of human existence and the potential for clarity, knowledge and kindness that we all have within us. Kailash will continue to be a source of inspiration and power as long as man's quest for truth exists.

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