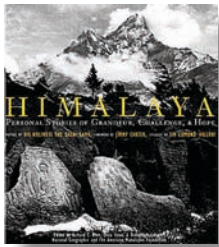


The Other Side of the Postcards



HIMALAYA

Personal Stories of Grandeur, Challenge, and Hope

Edited by Richard C. Blum, Erica Stone,
and Broughton Coburn

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REVIEWED BY BARBARA CROSSETTE

THERE IS A PARADOX in the Himalayan world, where Vajrayana Buddhism took deep root many centuries ago and created a unique civilization. In this dramatic environment, replete with spirits and breathtaking natural wonders, live some of the world's most heavily burdened and materially disadvantaged people, struggling on the edge of survival without schools for their children or basic medical care when they fall ill. A kind of earthy existential Buddhism, sometimes happily mixed with local superstition, sustains them, infuses them with compassion and endurance, and gives them the hope and courage to go on.

This was the rugged, glorious world that the first foreign mountain climbers encountered when they arrived to take on the earth's tallest peaks—long before the sacred mountains became adventure tourism destinations where visitors littered the virgin slopes with trash. The early mountaineers from the West were not, for the most part, spiritual seekers. But the powerful aura of the mountains and the strengths of Himalayan life drew them in—to homes, to hamlets, to monasteries—and transformed them.

“People—mostly nonclimbers—talk about ‘conquering’ mountains,” writes Jim Whittaker, the first American to climb Mount Everest, in 1963, and one of several dozen contributors to this unusual book. “Nothing could be further from the truth. We do not conquer mountains, but rather we conquer ourselves.”

Early mountaineers, including Sir Edmund Hillary, committed themselves to “giving some-

PHOTO BY JIMMY CHIN

PHOTO BY NICHOLAS DAWSON



Top, right: Mountain climber Conrad Anker traverses a ridge during an outing with Sherpas from the Khumbu Climbing School. Right: Security forces in Kathmandu face down demonstrators protesting the autocratic rule of Nepal's King Gyanendra in 2004.



Left: Tibetan monks rest at the edge of lake Yiloung Lhatso, in Kham province, eastern Tibet. Right: Durbar Square in Kathmandu during the annual festival of Teej.

PHOTOS BY MATTHIEU RICARD (LEFT) AND GORDON WILTSE (RIGHT)

thing back” to the people of the Himalayas, and one of the first results was the American Himalayan Foundation, created in 1979. *Himalaya: Personal Stories of Grandeur, Challenge, and Hope* was compiled by foundation officers, and proceeds from the book will go to supporting its work: building schools and clinics, restoring temples and other historic sites, and assisting refugees across the Tibetan Buddhist universe, from Indian Ladakh to Tibet, Nepal, and Bhutan.

Produced by *National Geographic*, the glossy book has arresting photographs of the mountains, their sturdy people, and vivid scenes of religious life, interspersed with short essays (some better than others) from an eclectic range of writers from the East as well as the West. Its pages are shared by rinpoches and abbots, famous Sherpa guides and their Western climbing partners, local medical pioneers, supportive outsiders, and even the King of Mustang, from his remote fastness on the Nepal–Tibet border.

If there is a drawback in this collection it is that it is weighted so heavily toward Nepal, at least among the essays if not the photography. Indeed, Jigme Palbar Bista, the Mustang raja, gets away with suggesting that he rules the last Himalayan kingdom. The Bhutanese would find fault with that. It is Bhutan that ranks as the last of the Tibetan Buddhist monarchies still standing independent of India and China, and the Bhutanese tied themselves in knots and attracted much international opprobrium for their attempt a couple of decades ago to insure they stay that way by evicting non-Drukpa people who could not prove their citizenship.

Nepal, however, has certainly been a Himalayan focal point for many. Though it was (at least until recently) a Hindu kingdom, its generous spirit could overcome the curse of caste—described in this book by the brilliant Nepali writer Manjushree Thapa—to welcome Buddhist and Bon teachers from neighbor-

ing countries and students and practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism from around the world. North beyond the Kathmandu Valley, the people of Nepal’s high mountain regions have long been Buddhists, and more accessible to Westerners than many of their counterparts in, for example, Tibet or Bhutan.

We learn the elements of Himalayan life from the wisdom of ordinary people as well as the scholarly. Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche, head of a Buddhist institute as well as abbot of the Ka-Nying Shedrub Ling Monastery in Nepal, writes of his dying mother advising him, an incarnate lama: “Just be yourself, in a straightforward manner, and don’t pretend to be special. Otherwise your life will become a grand delusion.”

Or consider the honesty of Apa Sherpa, a great mountaineer who climbed Mount Everest sixteen times at enormous risk. Praying to the deity Miyolangsangma, a goddess whom Sherpas believe must give them her blessing to enter her domain, he worried he might be wearing out his welcome among the peaks, and what that would mean to his family. He lived with no illusions; he had already lost a thirteen-year-old daughter to meningitis.

“If I do not climb Everest,” he wrote matter-of-factly in this book, “there is no money to pay for our children’s college education, and they, too, will be forced to climb mountains for a living.”

Apa Sherpa and others like him have left indelible impressions on outsiders who wander into the Himalayas, where Buddhism is not a lifestyle or exercise regime but a set of necessary core beliefs to guide a person not only to the dangerous summits of mountains but also through this very hard life and into the next. “I’ve climbed a few high peaks and survived some exotic adventures,” says the mountaineer Conrad Anker, “yet it is the smiling, laughing, caring, strong, and compassionate people of the Himalaya that have changed me.” ♦