

FOLLOWING THE PATHS OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM — THE SACRED MOUNTAIN OF KAILAS

TOMO VINŠĆAK

Department of Ethnology
Faculty of Philosophy
10000 Zagreb, Ivana Lučića 3

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University of Zagreb's Ethnology Department in cooperation with Mr. Darko Beljak, who led the expedition, organized a study excursion to Tibet in September and October of 1999. Our team consisted of 18 members, among them five ethnology and indology students (Ivana Hrdas, Maja Košćević, Ines Lasić, Olga Orlić, Ana Marija Pandurić) and two of their teachers — Tomo Vinšćak, who lead the ethnological research, and Krešimir Krnic. The purpose of their stay in Tibet was to acquaint themselves with Tibetan traditional culture, religion, rituals, customs, and their way of life. This paper aims at giving an outline of the course of the journey and also to interpret the most important practices of pilgrimage.

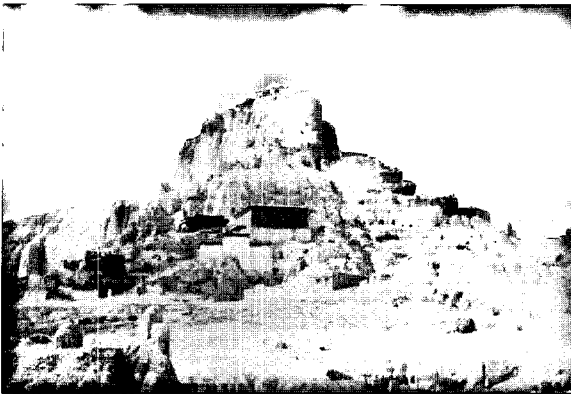
We visited many important cultural and religious centers of Tibet, most important of which is the holy Mt. Kailas¹, rising to 6,714 m in western Tibet, close to the Nepalese and Indian borders. Before taking off for Kailas we visited the Tsurpu monastery situated a five-hour drive away from Lhasa in order to receive blessings from a lama called Tsurpu Karmapa². In 1999 he was the highest-ranking spiritual leader in Tibet (as the 14th Dalai Lama lives in India) and is recognized both by the Dalai Lama and by the Chinese authorities. This great lama was 16 at the time and once a week he would receive and give blessings to pilgrims, both Tibetan and foreign. Karmapa's blessings are especially important to those planning to visit Kailas, for it is a long and exhausting journey than not everyone manages to complete. There were no Buddhists in our team but still, while there, we acted according to Buddhist rites and the Tibetan way of life. Some schools of ethnology are of an opinion that

¹Kailas, Sanskrit Kailāsa, in some languages Kailash, called Kang Rimpoche by the Tibetans, Kang Tise by the Bon population and Astapada by the Jains.

²On January 6, 2000 Karmapa secretly fled Tibet and joined the Dalai Lama in India. He lives now in a Buddhist monastery in India.



Photo 1: The northern side of Kailas. Resting pilgrims. Photo by: Vinšćak, 1999.



*Photo 2: Remnants of the kingdom of Guga.
Photo by: T. Vinšćak, 1999.*

such an approach is very important, and that people doing anthropological and ethnological research should not observe cultural elements as outsiders, but rather as insiders. Having accepted the Buddhist norms of behavior in pilgrimage, we made all the necessary preparations for our journey. Each of the eighteen of us also had some personal desires regarding the sacred Kailas Mountain.

On September 14, 1999 we set out from the Tibetan capital Lhasa on our way to Mt. Kailas. To be allowed to travel through Tibet from Lhasa to Kailas, foreigners need permits issued by the Chinese authorities. After obtaining all necessary papers our team rented four off-road vehicles and a truck we needed

to haul our fuel, tents, and food necessary for what was estimated to be a 3000 km and 25 days long voyage. All our drivers were Tibetans, and only one of them had already made that trip before. We set out west from Lhasa, taking the *southern road* through famous Tibetan towns with Gyantze, Shigatze, Tashilumpo, and Sakya monasteries. After visiting Sakya we went north to the Chang Tang desert. Having reached the town of Gertze, the only trade center for the pastoral and nomadic Drokpo people on the desert's eastern perimeter, we once again turned west and, after a three-day ride arrived to a town called Ali, on the desert's western rim. After Ali we reached the location of once powerful Guge kingdom, that ended in the 17th century, where we found the town of Tholing and ruins of Tsaparang. Tholing and Tsarpang are situated alongside a canyon made by the Sutlej River.

This was the westernmost point of our trip. We turned back east then, towards our final goal.

After a one-day ride we reached the village of Moitser. We had to stay there for a day and a night waiting for our supply truck that got stuck in a hole in the road. When we finally saw it, after we were already half starved, we were thrilled to be able to continue our voyage. After 13 days of driving through the Tibetan Plateau on elevation between 4000 and 5600 meters, on September 27, we suddenly saw a recognizable sight: a four-sided snow-clad pyramid, the center of the world, the sacred Mt. Kailas.

We were all thrilled and excited, and our Tibetan drivers kept throwing their hats up in the air and exclaiming *lha so, lha so!* — a traditional Tibetan greeting to the mountains and deities living there. In the place where a pilgrim first sees Kailas he piles a few rocks one upon the other which symbolize a Buddhist *stūpa* or *chorten*. The author of this text too made a *chorten* of his own, as a memento to that moment. After a break we headed on and reached Darchen in the evening. Darchen is a small village on the foothills of Kailas's southern side where we rented yaks to carry our supplies and then started our three-day circle around Kailas.

People make the pilgrimage to Kailas either alone, or with their family, or sometimes with the entire population of their village. It takes at least two days to complete the Kailas circuit, but some stay there for an entire month and make 13 outer *khorras* after which they are allowed to enter the inner one.

Hindu and Jain pilgrims coming on foot from India make the longest trip and their number is limited by the Chinese authorities' decision to issue only 400 Kailas visas a year. But this limitation in fact serves environmental and religious purposes, since otherwise it could happen that Kailas be turned into a great market of religious tourism.

First westerners visited Kailas two hundred years ago and the mountain became the goal for many researchers of Tibet ever since (Shelling 1990:77-216). Ten years ago the Chinese authorities allowed foreigners access to Kailas and people from the west have been coming in large numbers since then.

Kailas is a holy place for four Asian religions: Bon, Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism. Even before Buddhism came from India to Tibet, the local Bon population believed the summit of Kailas to be the abode of a deity called Gekho. What the Olympus had meant to the ancient Greeks, Kailas meant to the Tibetans. There are all together 24 mountains in Tibet that serve as places of pilgrimage. Out of these, three are particularly holy: Labchi, Tsari, and Kailas. All three of them are believed to be the abode of a Buddhist deity called Demchok (Dowman 1997:153). It is also believed that no human has ever set foot on Kailas's summit, nor ever will, for it is too holy and a human foot would desecrate it. Kailas has always been the goal of pious pilgrims. Tibetan Buddhists consider it to be the *axis mundi*, center of the world. According to the oldest Sanskrit tradition the Meru or Sumeru Mountain represents the axis of the world and is not only its physical but also metaphysical center.

The Jains call Mt. Kailas Astpada and to them it is the place where the first Tirthankara, Ishabha, attained *moksha*, or liberation (Shelling 1990:25).

To the Hindus, Kailas is the heavenly seat of Śiva and the abode of Kubera, while to the Buddhists, it represents a great Universal mandala of Dhyāni Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, as it is stated in the famous Demchog Tantra. The Bon population identifies the mountain with a crystal *chorten* or *stūpa*. To an ordinary Tibetan pilgrim, Kailas represents the heavenly king and the surrounding, lower peaks its ministers. To the Hīnayāna Buddhists it is a place where Buddha used to dwell with his 500 Arhats, and to the Tantric Buddhists it is the abode of Demchok (Samvara) and his companion Dorje Phakmo (Dowman 1997:155).

Walking around holy places connected to the roots and basis of their religion is one the most important rites to every Tibetan. Two destinations are considered the holiest - the Jokhang monastery in Lhasa and the sacred Kailas Mountain - and every Tibetan wishes to visit them at least once in his lifetime. The most persistent of the pilgrims make that, sometimes up to a 1000 kilometers long, journey measuring it with the length of their body by performing prostration through the entire length of the journey. Today such pilgrims are rare because now-a-days they travel by off-road vehicles or trucks.

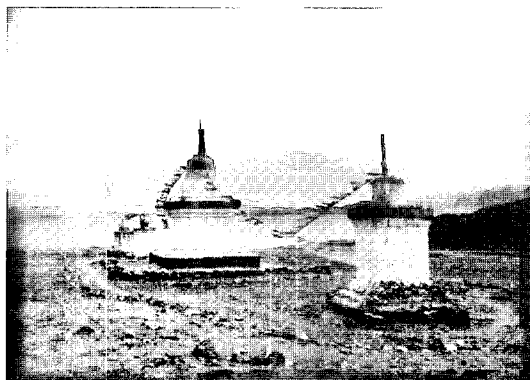
Tibetan word for pilgrimage is *neykhor* and means *circling around holy places* (Dunham 1993:132). Holy places can be monasteries, mountains, rivers, lakes, *chortens* (*stūpas*), or sacred trees (Chan 1994:40).

To fully understand the meaning of Kailas and its remarkable surroundings one should not only observe it from geographical, cultural, or historical point of view, but mostly through eyes of a pilgrim. Those that make the *khorra*, or the ritual circle, around that holy mountain with utmost dedication and perfect spiritual concentration, are believed to have made a full circle through life and death.

Two pilgrim paths lead around Kailas: the wider, outer *khorra*, and the narrower, or inner *khorra*. It is necessary to make at least 13 outer *khorras* to be allowed to enter the inner one. The inner *khorra* leads directly from Darchen through a narrow valley to the gash on the mountain's southern side and then goes around a small peak called Nandi. This gutter or gash on the mountain's southern face, viewed from particular localities, seems to Buddhist pilgrims like *klachakra* - the wheel of time - and from others like a swastika or a Tsi rock. Two Buddhist monasteries are located along the inner *khorra* path: Silung and Gyentok. We have not made the inner *khorra* this time for we had not been able to complete the thirteen outer ones. According to the Tibetan lunar calendar, the year 2002 will be the year of the horse and one outer *khorra* will count as thirteen, so that some of our team members are already making plans for a second visit to Kailas when they would be granted access to the inner *khorra* after walking along the wider path just once.

To complete one wide *khorra* by going clockwise around Kailas means a three-day or a 60-km walk. The circle starts and ends in the village of Darchen, south of Kailas. The Tibetans believe that anyone who completes 108 Kailas *khorras* in his lifetime will be liberated from all life sufferings and that the path to *nirvāṇa*, the state of bliss, will be open to him. That person then ends his material life in this world and continues to live as an enlightened being. Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists all walk around Kailas moving from west to east, only followers of the Black Bon³ walk in opposite direction - from east to west. In order to distinguish themselves from the orthodox Buddhists, all of their movements are performed opposite to the direction of the Sun's apparent orbit. Ethnologists will know that the direction of all movements connected to growth, development, and fertility is always in accordance with the direction of the Sun, and that only funeral processions move in the opposite direction. Why then do the followers of Bon perform their rituals contrary to anyone else has still not been clarified.

³ Bon (Bön) is an old, pre-buddhist religion, or a system of beliefs, that incorporates ancient shamanic and animistic cults and magic, which are a common feature to the natives of Tibet, Mongolia, and Siberia. In the 8th century, Tibetan king Trisong Detsen made Buddhism the chief religion of Tibet, and for political reasons he abolished Bon (Downan, 1997:53). Buddhism is considered to have enriched the old beliefs in a special way, and Bon has survived, thusly enriched, as a separate system of beliefs, as a popular form of Buddhism very permeated with Tantrism; there are two types of Bon: Black and White. The followers of the Black Bon used to be familiar even with ritual human sacrifices. These sacrifices are no longer made, but magic, shamanism, and witchcraft are still very much present (Downan, 1997:58).



*Photo 3: The holy lake of Mānasarovar.
Photo by: T. Vinšćak, 1999.*



*Photo 4: Croatian pilgrims. Photo
by: T. Vinšćak, 1999.*

At the very beginning of our circle around Kailas, only an hour away from Darchen, we came to a place called Tarboche. Every winter at the time of the fool moon in the fourth month of the lunar year, a festival called Saga Dawa, the most important annual festival on the foothills of Kailas, is held. Thousands of pilgrims from all over Tibet pour into the area to hang their prayer flags. Some of them stay here for an entire month performing Buddhist rites (Chang 1994:278).

While moving in a long procession of pilgrims, taking every precaution not to be trampled by loaded yaks, we noticed a number of pilgrims had separated from the group and headed towards a flat rock called Darchen Ngyaye Durtro. There we saw a Tibetan woman dragging her child over that level rock

where pieces of a dismembered human body were still laying around. That is a particularly holy locality for the Tibetans because it is the cemetery of the 84 Mahāsiddhas⁴.

After the first day, walking alongside the left bank of the Lha Chu (Divine) River, we reached a Buddhist gumpa called Drira Puk. We sat camp there and decided to stay for two days and two nights. The Drira Puk Gumpa, standing 5000 m above sea level, gives the best view towards the always snow-clad northern Kailas face, which the Hindus consider to be the abode of Śiva. The Tibetan pilgrims also pitched their tents there, so we had a perfect opportunity to observe their rituals. Facing the mountain's northern face, the Buddhist pilgrims send their prayers by performing prostration. Our communication with other pilgrims was hindered by the fact that none of our team members spoke Tibetan, but for a few common phrases. Still, we managed to make contact. Our cook, a Sherpa from Nepal, Mr. Rinji, helped us with his knowledge of English and Tibetan, along with Nepalese. Some of us even climbed up to the northern face of Kailas covered with constant ice and snow at height of 6000 m.

While advancing together with Buddhist pilgrims towards the Drölma Pass (Tib. Drölma La) that separates the northern and southern valley, we reached a place called Siwatshali Durtrö. Pilgrims are supposed to lye down on the ground there, between two large rocks, into a position of a dying man and imagine their journey after death through *bardo*. After ritually dying, the pilgrims enter the kingdom of the horrible Dorje Jigje, the Death God (Chan, 1994:286). At that moment a man becomes aware of everyone he had loved and who has died, and everyone whom he had not loved back, and prays for their happiness and rebirth in any form. As a confirmation of their wishes, pilgrims leave certain symbols or relics of their earthly lives. These are mostly items of clothing, pieces of cloth, bones, saddlebags, shoes, locks of hair, or ashes from a funeral pyre. Some pilgrims even cut their finger and squeeze out some blood, or knock out a tooth and place it into a rock crack. Pilgrims believe that Milarepa has left his footprint in a rock nearby.

⁴ In Buddhist tradition, Drachom Ngagye Durtöl is a holy place chosen by the mahāsiddhas (great saints), monks, and lamas as their place of death, probably by cremation. The rocks where the "sky-burials" are performed are considered holy and are revered. Pilgrims leave their personal belongings, hair, nails, etc., because they wish to be in contact with those that ended their earthly life here. Sometimes, even, pilgrims lay down on the ground and try to visualize their own death and everyone wishes to be cremated right there, just like their famous predecessors. Cremation in this place is very expensive and difficult to arrange for the ordinary families of the deceased. The strong smell left over from cremations makes this place very holy for it indicates the presence of gods. Contact with that divine idea is the reason for pilgrims to come here (Cham, 1994:279).

All pilgrims symbolically die here. Afterwards they pass through a valley leading to the Drölma Pass. The passage through the valley symbolizes passage through the state of *bardo* which lasts for 49 days after physical death.

We too cut off a lock of hair from each other and left them beside the great rock. While walking through that valley, a man feels very peculiar, feeling like he is leaving his entire life behind him together with all the people he knew and loved. Some of the female members of our team could not refrain from crying.

A half an hour walk away from Siwathal Durtrö towards the Drölma Pass, on our right-hand side we saw a cone of stone called Shinje Melong. Its reddish base is believed to be the “mirror of the death king”, called Shinje by the Tibetans. Pilgrims throw themselves on the ground in front of it and some of them perform a Tantric rite and chant prayers glorifying Padmasambhava or Guru Rimpoche, as the Tibetans call him (Cham 1994: 286).

Unlike the rest of the pilgrim path where one can hear the constant shouting of yak drivers and chatter of pilgrims, this valley is filled with complete silence and everyone walks calmly and without making a sound. Even the altitude sickness and weariness disappear.

When we reached the Drölma Pass we were all reborn, symbolically, and also purified of all our sins, because Drölma is the goddess of mercy that forgives all sins to those who arrive there (Cham 1994:288).

All pilgrims, be they Buddhist or westerners, feel extremely happy and excited after reaching the Drölma Pass. They hang holy scarves - *kaatas* - and prayer flags, and cry out Tibetan praises to deities: “Lhaso!” “Kiki Soso Lha Gyalo!” “Kiki Soso Lasolo!” The entire saddle is always adorned with new prayer flags.

After the Drölma Pass, the descend to the valley begins. Immediately after the pass, amidst rocks and snow, a small lake, emerald green in color, can be seen. Tibetans call it Tukje Tso or *Great Mercy Lake*, while the Hindus call it Gaurikund. Anyone who bathes in the cold lake is reinitiated into a new life. Some of us have done it, but only from the waist up. The lake water is believed to be holy so the pilgrims take it home with them. We did it, too. It is not uncommon for pilgrims, especially those coming all the way from India, to die of exhaustion while climbing the steep Drölma Pass, 5670 m above sea level, for it is very cold there and the amount of oxygen in the air is very small. But the pious pilgrims are not afraid of dying in presence of gods and in the holiest place in the world for they believe it would be a happy death.

Down in the eastern valley we reached the Zutrul Puk cave where, between the 11th and 12th century, Milarepa, a Buddhist poet and the most famous holy man of Tibet had lived. Milarepa sang and meditated there, and the pilgrims today see his handprint on the ceiling of the cave which was turned into a Buddhist temple.

After a three-day walk, once again we came to the open plain and soon afterwards to the starting and ending point of the *khorra* - the village of Darchen. Along the way, we passed by many *maṇi* walls built out of thousands of rocks with the *Om maṇi padme hum* mantra carved into them, praising Avalokiteśvara who dwells like a precious gem - *maṇi* - in the heart of every pious pilgrim. Everyone who passes there places a rock of his own as a symbol of gratitude for everything this pilgrimage gave him, and as a blessing to all those who will come here afterwards.

A pilgrim's goal is not just to visit a holy place but also to cleanse himself of the profane reality by this enterprise. The voyage towards a place of pilgrimage is twofold - one is the real passage through different countries and areas, and the other is the inner, spiritual voyage.

This is no place for contemplating the complex metaphysical and psychological teachings of Hinduism and Tantric Buddhism. However, the question, how come that among all the mighty peaks of the Himalayan and Trans-Himalayan region it is Kailas that stands out as the center of the world, comes up spontaneously. One of the possible answers appears when we look at a map showing Kailas's position in the Tibetan Plateau, and the way it is connected to the river system of the Indo-Tibetan region. Kailas is the highest peak of the Tibetan Plateau and an array of rivers flows out of it like wheel spokes towards east, west, northwest, and south. These are the Brahmaputra, Indus, Sutlej, and Karnali. All of them emerge out of the Kailas area and the Mnsarovar Lake. Tibetans believe that these rivers, if looked at from the air, form a swastika with Kailas as its center.

Old scriptures say that these rivers flow out of the Mnsarovar Lake just beneath Kailas and make seven circles around the holy region before they take their separate courses. This is the rivers' way to show respect to the Seat of Gods in accordance with the old custom of circumambulation (Skt. *pradakṣiṇā*). East of Kailas and Mānsarovar springs out the Brahmaputra which Tibetans call "Tamchog-Kham-bab" (*rTa-mchog Kha-hbab*) — *flows out of horse's mouth*. Sutlej, emerging from the west, is called "Lanchen-Kham-bab" — *flows out of elephant's mouth*. From the north springs out the Indus — "Senge-Kham-bab" (*Sen-ge Kha-hbab*) — *flows out of lion's mouth*. The southern river, Karnali



Photo 5: Tibetan woman carrying a child on the way around Kailas, wearing traditional clothing. Photo by: T. Vinšćak, 1999.



Photo 6: A young Tibetan boy on his way around Kailas in traditional clothing. Photo by: T. Vinšćak, 1999.

(called Gogra in the plains), is called “Magcha Khambab” (Mag.byā Kha-hbab) — *flows out of peacock’s mouth*. These animals are symbols of the four Dhyāni Buddhas and the names of the rivers show that they are considered to be parts of the universal *maṇḍala* with Kailas as its center (Govinda 1984:199-200).

After successfully completing the *khorra* around Kailas and after we were, according to Buddhist beliefs, reborn and purified of all our sins, we headed towards the holy lakes Mānasarovar (Tib. Tso Mapham) and Rākshas Tal (Tib. Langak Tso).

Just like every temple in India has its lake, Kailas has two holy lakes on its southern foothills. The Mānasarovar Lake is formed like a sun and symbolizes the forces of light. Rākshas Tal has a form of the moon sickle and symbolizes the hidden forces of darkness. As long as their true nature is not conceived and these forces are not directed to certain channels, they appear as demonic forces of darkness. These ideas are expressed through the names of these lakes: *manas* is Sanskrit for spirit or consciousness and is considered to be the center of recognition, a force of light and enlightenment. *Rākshasa*, on the other hand, is a Sanskrit name for a demon so that Rākshas Tal is a demon-lake.

These symbols of the sun and moon are used on every Tibetan *thangka* (thang-ka) where Buddhas, deities, or holy men are depicted. According to Buddhist tradition, queen My saw the protector gods of the Anotata Lake (Pāli name for Mānasarovar) in a dream taking her bedspread and washing it in the lake's holy water. This way it was cleansed of all human impurities so that Buddha was able to enter her womb. In her dream Buddha appeared to her as a white elephant coming from the holy Mt. Kailas within a cloud and entering her body.

The Hindu tradition says that Brahma — the god of creation — made the Mānasarovar Lake and the divine Jambu tree growing in its center, but invisible to the human eye. This is why the ancient Indians called the world Jambudvīpa (Jambu continent). For the Mānasarovar's water they say that the fruits of the divine tree made it into a life-giving elixir. Tibetans say that the Kailas-Mānasarovar region is the navel of Jambudvīpa (earth), center of all lands, roof of the world, land of gems and gold, spring of four great rivers, dominated by the crystal temple — Kailas and adorned with the magical turquoise mirror of the (Govinda 1984:202).

It is also interesting to mention that even the geographical position of the two lakes corresponds to their light-dark, day-night relationship. Mānasarovar is in the east, where the sun rises and marks the beginning of a day, while Rākshas Tal is in the west where the sun sets and night begins.

Mānasarovar is surrounded by an array of monasteries and ascetic habitations, while the dark lake has no human settlements whatsoever regardless of a strange mysterious atmosphere that floats above it. Even though pilgrims fear and avoid that lake, it is still just as holy as its twin Mānasarovar (Govinda 1998:225).

A pilgrim path 120 km long leads around the Mānasarovar Lake but we had not had the time to go around it.

We continued our journey on the so-called southern Tibetan road leading alongside the northern Himalayan rim and after a five-day ride we reached Zangma - a town on the Chinese-Nepalese border. Our successful pilgrimage to Kailas ended on October 8, 1999 when we reached Kathmandu, hoping we will return to Tibet once again.

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