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Pilgrimage in Tibet: The Yoga of Transformation

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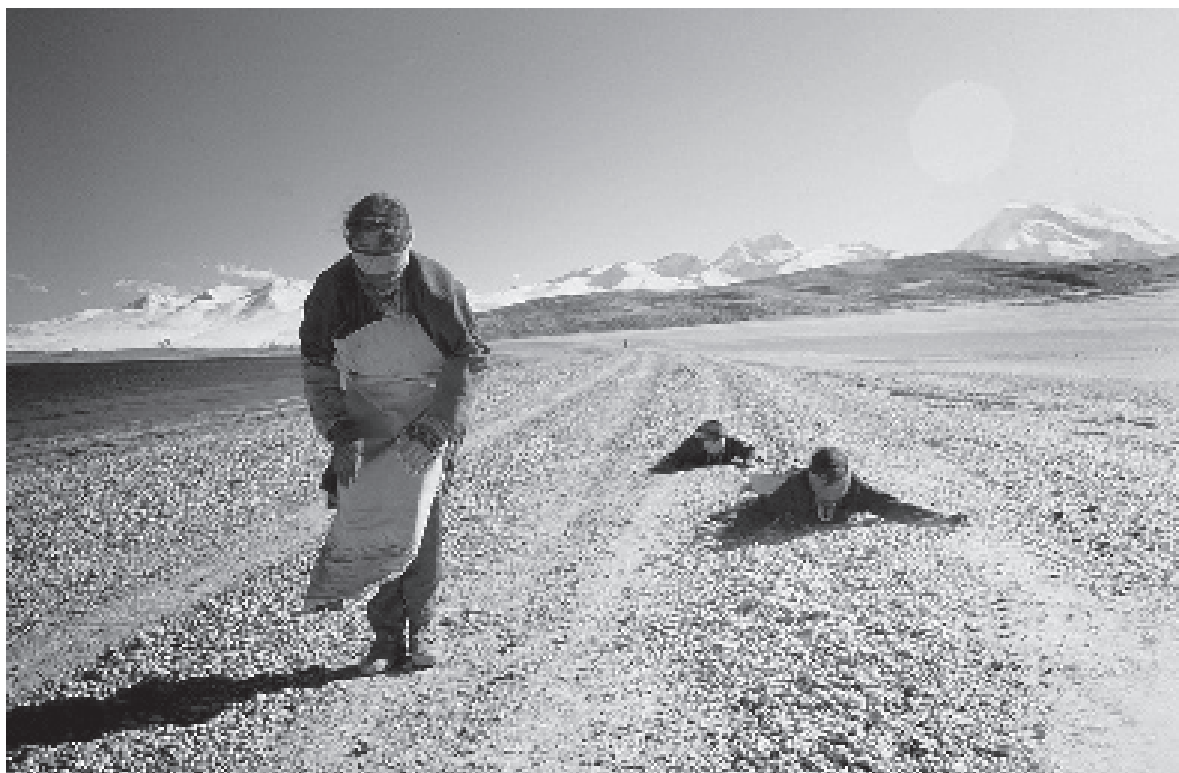


Yak skull and prayer flags on pilgrimage route around Mr. Kailash

PHOTO: RACHEL HUMPHREY

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PILGRIMAGE IN TIBET: THE YOGA OF TRANSFORMATION



Chaktsal around Tso Mapham

PHOTO: ANNA URBANSKA

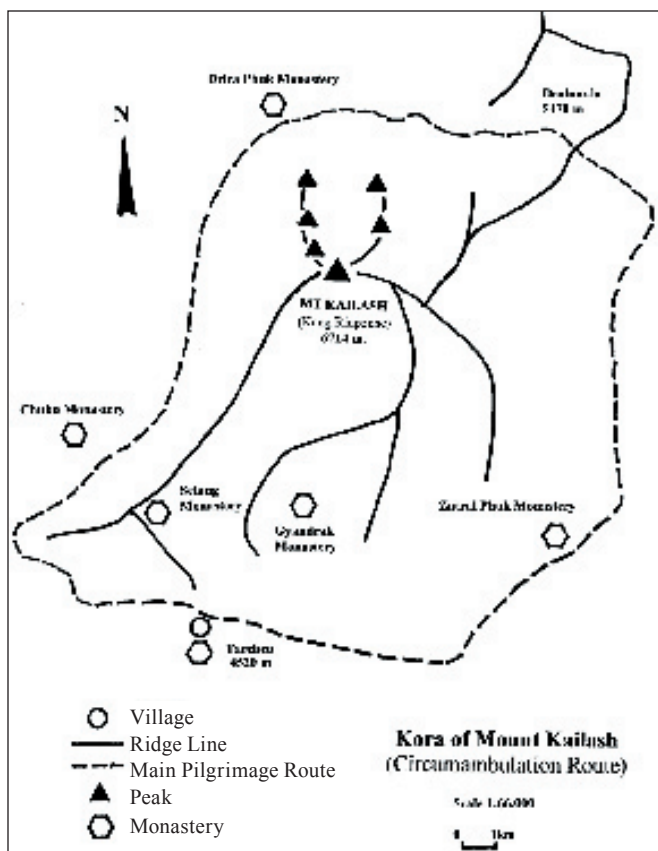
THE ancient art and yoga¹ of pilgrimage is still alive in Tibet. Even under the cultural suppression of Chinese occupation since 1959, Tibetans have managed to engage in this spiritual practice so integral to their culture. Yet these forms of pilgrimage have been harder to share with the outside world than other aspects of Tibetan religion and culture. While the Tibetans' practice of pilgrimage is focused on their relationship with the land in which they live and their unique holy places, the principles of pilgrimage—making relationship with places, as well as the conscious transformational journey to those places—have value to those beyond these geographic borders. The balance of spiritual and earth-based practice is, I feel, a key to the effectiveness of their spiritual tradition.

It was not until I had the opportunity to visit Tibet in 1992 that I could really see first hand the Tibetan connection with their land and the Tibetan fervor for

pilgrimage. In the west we have a tendency to separate body and mind, philosophy and land. It was easy for those of us who studied with the Tibetan teachers in exile to simply assume that these practices were merely secondary practices. Working with Tibetans removed from their homeland, it was not possible to see the relationship to place that was a deep and supporting aspect of Tibetan spiritual practices. During my first visit to Tibet I saw Tibetans of all ages engaged to walking and prostrating to pilgrimage sites. Walking with them I could feel both their deep dedication and their reverence for the land.

What distinguishes a pilgrim from a tourist is attitude. The Dalai Lama has said that the truly great pilgrim doesn't need to go anywhere, but for most of us it is useful to enact in the outer world that which we wish to engender in the inner world. He also noted that purpose of a pilgrimage is to engage in transformation; if we come home the same as we left

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it was not worth the time or money. Thus the art of pilgrimage is a yoga of transformation.

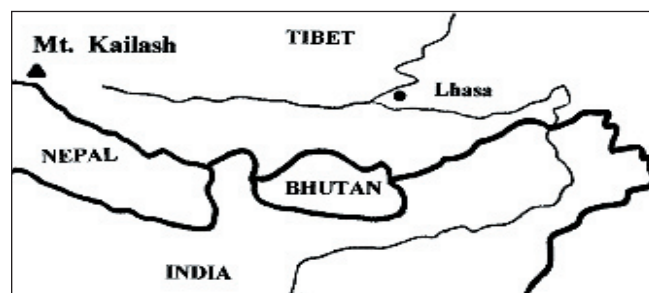
I think that we in the West can learn much from the Tibetan art of pilgrimage. In the spirit of pluralism I feel that it is possible to share inspiration with other traditions without becoming succumbing to the pitfalls of cultural appropriation or idealization. There is much to be said for learning (or relearning) ways to engage in respectful journey that is not about conquering a mountain or accumulating places and experiences for personal prestige. The cultural lenses of one's time and place shape what is seen and understood of another culture. With this proviso I will share some of the aspects of Tibetan pilgrimage that have inspired me and shifted my view of my role and movement within the natural world. I saddened by the knowledge that, while I am able to visit Tibet in order to observe and make comment on the practice of pilgrimage, most of my Tibetans friends here in the west will be lucky to return (with any degree of personal safety) during this lifetime.

My first visit to central Tibet in 1992 was followed by two pilgrimages to Mount Kailash in western Tibet in 1996 and 2000. During these journeys I had the opportunity to encounter many Tibetans engaged in pilgrimage. From the circumambulation of some twenty minutes around the Jokhang temple in Lhasa, to the months required to prostrate from

Central Tibet to Mount Kailash, I observed Tibetans devoting themselves to this ancient practice. The classic pilgrimage texts, such as Jamyang Kyentse Wangpo's *Guide to the Holy Places of Central Tibet* and Blama Btsan-po's *'Dzam-gling-rgyas-bshad*, rarely mention the route between pilgrimage places in any detail. I saw what was left out of the books: the great ecological expertise and personal courage it takes to cross these rain-shadow desert landscapes of Tibet to arrive at the traditional holy sites. Even with modern conveyances it is still often a rough and challenging journey. Tibetans had to use their knowledge and endurance to cross the vast, dry, sunlit spaces of the land to arrive at the dark, womblike monasteries and caves filled with rich, phantasmagorical and transformational art that were the objects of their pilgrimage.

The images from my very first night in Lhasa remain vivid in my mind. That night I went down to the Jokhang, built by King Srongtsen Gampo around 642 AD, and said to be the holiest temple in Tibet. Still standing, though much abused during the Cultural Revolution when it was used as a pigsty and for grain storage, it has been renovated over recent years. The monastery now has a few monks who are allowed to look after it and the doors are locked at night. Outside those doors old men and women were making prostrations, stretching their entire bodies onto the ground. The stones were worn and grooved by centuries of people making prostrations on that spot. Clasp hands over their forehead they bring folded hands to the crown (body), the throat (speech) and the heart (mind) before lowering themselves to their knees and stretching out full length on the ground. They were reciting "May I purify body, speech, and mind in order to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all beings" over and over again, creating an atmosphere of great peace in the deepening dusk of that evening.

In his book *The Sacred Life of Tibet*, Keith Dowman had documented the many sites of Tibetan pilgrimage: caves where great meditators have spent many years, holy lakes where visions can be gained, famous monasteries where many teachers have studied, sites where hidden texts (terma) have been found, stupas where the ashes of great teachers have been interred, sacred mountains... This list is long and mingles sites of spiritual transformation via meditation practice with natural features where the energy is said to be conducive to spiritual awareness. Tibetans have had a prac-





tice of engaging in pilgrimage when there was sufficient time and opportunity, throughout their lives. Now under Chinese occupation opportunities to do so have been limited. But this has not quelled this essential part of Tibetan culture.

Pilgrimage is considered an essential part of the path to enlightenment. Many great teachers have engaged in pilgrimage throughout their lives. One Tibetan story, collected by Keith Dowman (1997:110), suggests that although some have thought of it as a path for the impatient and weak-minded, it none-the-less can result in spiritual awakening:

“Jogipa was an Indian tantric initiate with so little intellectual acumen that he was unable to understand even the tantric precepts that his teacher gave him and with such weak powers of concentration that he could not sit still long enough to meditate. His teacher substituted pilgrimage for meditation, instructing him to walk to the 24 great power places while chanting the mantra of the Buddha-deity Demchok. After twelve years of pilgrimage he had purified the defilements of his mind and attained the state of Buddhahood called Mahamudra.”

Many famous teachers, judging from the many stories and sites in Tibet associated with them, carried out pilgrimage as part of their practice. Nearly every great teacher spent time visiting and meditating in the area around Mount Kailash. Even after awakening, Guru Rinpoche, the yogi who helped establish Buddhism in Tibet in the 7th Century, engaged in pilgrimage. “After buddhahood has been attained, pilgrimage becomes a skillful means of benefiting other beings. Guru Rinpoche himself after demonstrating the way of tantric meditation practice while wandering from power place to power place and finally attaining the Buddha’s enlightenment, spent the rest of his life on pilgrimage in Tibet, a large part of it with his Tibetan consort, Yeshe Tsogyal, meditating at the power places” (Dowman 1997:110).

The yoga of pilgrimage calls for actions that purify body, speech, and mind. These enactments in the outer world reach the deepest levels of the human psyche or unconscious mind within and engender transformation. The practices of circumambulation, prostration, offering, recitation of mantra, and meditation keep the pilgrim engaged in a level of concentration that alters their state of mind and experience of place.

Circumambulation or *korra* of sites brings the pilgrim into relation with the energy and focal point of the site. “Korra is usually performed clockwise around an image—a chorten [stupa], a temple, a gumpa [monastery], or a sacred mountain or lake—while some korra embrace a unity of power-places that can take days or weeks to circumambulate” (Dowman 1988, 5-6). The action of moving through the four directions of the mandala brings the pilgrim into experiential relationship with the object at the center of the mandala. The pilgrim literally becomes the form and principle of the center of the mandala through visualization and encompassment. Circumambulation can be considered a practice of purifica-

tion of the body. Combined with recitation of mantra and visualization it actually includes all three forms of purification at once.

Prostration (essentially body purification) invokes many elements including touching the earth, enacting devotion, and engendering receptivity. Tibetans prostrate around holy sites. I saw some pilgrims prostrating all the way from Lhasa to Mount Kailash. This practice definitely connects the practitioner with the earth and its energies: “When you walk a circular pilgrimage route, such as the one around Mount Kailash, your feet touch the earth with big paces between them, but when you prostrate, your whole body connects with the sacred ground to close the circle” (Dalai Lama, 1990:132)

The practice of offering enacts reciprocity and relationship with the objects of refuge and respect. Tibetan pilgrim will carry bags of butter and offer spoonfuls of it at butter lamps in the great monasteries. *Katas* (white scarves) and money are also carried by pilgrimage to leave on altars and statues and holy sites as a sign of respect.

Recitation of mantra, sometimes accompanied by the spinning of a prayer wheel, engages the speech and the discursive mind of the pilgrim. This recitation and purification of speech is done both while circumambulating and during travel between sacred sites. This practice brings the lessons learned during meditation and study at the monastery out into the world and into every aspect of life. It heightens and strengthens all the other practices. It anchors the pilgrim in his/her intent of transformational journey.

While the practiced meditator needs to go nowhere, experiencing and meditating at the sites where great meditators and teachers have practiced is a significant goal of Tibetan pilgrimage. The morphic fields of the sites build up over time. Not only the great yogis but also centuries of devoted pilgrims have added to the original conducive energy of the site to create what Rabbi Zalman Schacter has referred to as “holograms.” This is considered helpful to the pilgrim in that a taste of the mind of enlightenment might speed of shift her current state of mind to a deeper level of practice.

As the pilgrim walks through the land s/he is surrounded by stories. This is significant to the whole context and effect of pilgrimage. Stories of the meditations, the caves and the life experiences of great yogis fill the minds of the pilgrims as they walk on their journey, casting their reflections on to these models of spiritual life. Mountains are seen as embodiments of enlightened forms or as deities. The peaks surrounding Mount Kailash, the most sacred mountain—said to be the center of the world, are seen as embodiments of the bodhisattvas Chenrezig, Vajrapani, and Manjushri. Tara Mountain in the same locale is viewed as having the shape of a stupa (Bachelor 1998: 272). Other peaks, such as the one called the Ax of Karma just over Dolma pass on the kora around Mount Kailash, remind the pilgrim of ethical teachings.



In essence, pilgrims pass through a landscape in which the sutric and tantric teachings have literally been imbedded in the land through centuries of living embodiment of spiritual life. This quality of ethical dialogue with the landscape takes various forms in traditional cultures. David Abram, in his discussion of Apache tradition in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, speaks of the “storied landscape” and “the moral efficacy of the landscape—this power of the land to ensure ethical and moral behavior in the community” (1996:154, 156), thus offering language for a way of being in dialogue with the land to those for whom similar traditions have been lost.

Having considered the traditions of pilgrimage that have evolved in Tibet over the last thirteen or more centuries, it is significant to turn to what is happening today. Even under Chinese occupation the tradition continues, albeit with overt suppression. There were decades in the 1960s and 70s when freedom of movement in Central Tibet was severely restricted. Since then the ability of Tibetans to move freely has varied with the political climate and level of suppression. In summer 2000 news came that Tibetans who were trying to engage in pilgrimage around the sacred sites of Lhasa, the Lingkor, were being fined for doing so. During my first visit to Tibet in 1992 I went to a spot at Chakpori (the hill next to the Potala and former site of the medical college) at about 5:30 p.m. I was very moved to see Tibetans of all ages and origins doing this traditional pilgrimage route as devotional practice after work. It struck me as an inspiration to see them out walking around and around their sacred places, connecting with land, tradition, and spiritual path even in the face of oppression. An act of transformation and faith had also become an act of courage and cultural survival.

The ability of Tibetans to rebuild their sacred sites and monasteries, hundreds and thousands of which had been destroyed both before and during the Cultural Revolution, has also ebbed and flowed with the rising and falling tide of suppression. In the early 1990s Tibetans rebuilt many of the sites that had been destroyed, recreating them with a beauty, accuracy, and faith the Chinese government’s efforts to reproduce them for tourists completely lacked. Since then more and more restrictions have kept Tibetans from being able to carry on this work.

My belief is that the power and beauty of the land and the Tibetans’ relationship with it endures in Tibet even as political suppression continues and increases. The power of the ancient pilgrimage sites in Tibet is palpable even to those with no experience or interest in Tibetan Religion. Pilgrimage remains as central to Tibetan cultural and spiritual life as baseball or family holidays to Americans in the United States. There is much for us in the West to learn from this way of moving through the land and this yoga of transformation. Recognizing the immense importance of supporting Tibetan culture under suppression and exile invites us to play

a significant role in ensuring that Tibetan culture continues to survive and offer its gifts to the world from both within and beyond Tibet.

The purpose of a pilgrimage is that one comes away altered. My experience of the pilgrimage around Mount Kailash is etched in my heart. The place alone is so powerful that one can simply never forget it. It remains ever present within my mind’s eye. The experience was supported by the presence of fellow pilgrims whose bodies, hearts, minds, hands, felt, enacted and recreated the sacred in every moment. It was not something soft and easy, or soon to be forgotten on return to the world at home, but something deep, pure, clear, and unforgettable. There is a place along the path around the mountain where everyone stops to contemplate his or her own death. Lying there among rags left by fellow pilgrims to symbolize their death, watching the circling vultures and raptors above, it was a time to consider my whole life and motivation for living. I could feel my small heart beating on the vast earth surrounded by mountains and glaciers...who is it that gets up and continues walking?

ENDNOTES

1 By yoga I mean “methods or disciplines by which freedom is attained” (from the Randon House dictionary). Pilgrimage—the act of walking across the landscape as a spiritual practice—is a method or discipline of spiritual practice like physical postures (hatha yoga), meditation etc.

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Sir J.D. Hooker