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A Mountain as Multiverse: Circumnavigating the realities and meta-realities of a Kailas pilgrim

SIMON PIASECKI

PREAMBLE

Walking is the most fundamental of human actions; we place one foot in front of the other and in so doing take ourselves on potentially huge journeys at a pace that allows us to observe. Writing about the Camino de Santiago, Keith Foskett says that 'if [walking] weren't so normal ... then I would consider it a revelation' (2012: 4).

Following some years of interest in walking mountains as a performer (see Piasecki 2007), I have begun to write about the endurance of pilgrimage, as an act of absolution or a seeking of enlightenment, considering partly that, in respect of pilgrimage, a sacred place is essentially activated by the journey.

The personal efficacy of this study informs the resolve to undertake a pilgrimage and is reconstructive in its mode, considering the multiple perspectives of those that have done so. Reconstruction provides an invaluable preparation of sorts and I offer mine to the reader in the hope that it conjures something of use, even for the weekend hiker. We should also consider this a normative theatrical exchange inasmuch as our reading or watching of any text requires an imaginary reconstruction according to our own empirical understanding of a range of sense experience – texture, sound, temperature and so forth. I have travelled in the high Himalayas, but perhaps you have not as yet, so let this be no impediment in the pursuit of understanding it as an idea, as a story; there is a rich tradition of doing so (just visit the Mappa Mundi)! Please do read this as a storytelling.

Since pilgrimage is spiritual and my interest artistic, I will shift my written register also at times between the objective and the academic, to the subjective, poetic and deeply personal; there are facts here, imaginings, reconstructions and subjectivity but these find consolidation in three foci:

- 1) the peaceful and unanimous appropriation of a single sacred space by multiple religions;
- 2) the ritual liminoid efficacy of a pilgrimage in a genuinely perilous environment;
- 3) the intertextuality of the symbolic space and the real space as they are performed within the unique natural mandala of Mount Kailas in Tibet.

The third reveals my subject – a most extraordinary and remote mountain of the high Himalayas.

KAILAS AS MULTIVERSE

In 1715 a Jesuit missionary called Ippolito Desideri, travelling in search of Lhasa from Ladakh, snow-blind and coughing blood, arrived at:

an infinitely high mountain ... its summit covered by clouds and perpetual snow and ice.... The Tibetans go to some trouble to pass right around this mountain which takes some days, and by doing so believe they will obtain very great (so to speak) indulgences. (qtd in Bargiacchi 2008: 23).

Desideri, suffering greatly in the conditions and observing the Tibetan pilgrims, recognized something familiar to his own religious experience of performed penitence.

In 1934 W. B. Yeats wrote a poem entitled *Meru* that conjures an image of pilgrims at both Everest and the mountain of its title, albeit that Yeats'

Meru is mythological (the Meru peak in India is not the sacred Meru of myth). In multiple theologies Meru is the centre of the world, its pillar, its 'Jacob's Ladder' and the Axis Mundi. In his poem, Yeats illustrates the notion of lives in a circle, of the truth of emptiness: man's life is 'ravaging, raging, and uprooting that he may come into the desolation of reality' (1934: 126).

The sacred mountain visited by Desideri, held to be the true Meru by its pilgrims, and the focus of this article, lies to the north of Everest,

some 400 miles distant. It is a less accessible and yet arguably just as visited mountain of the Himalayan range. This sacred mountain is called *Kailas*, sometimes *Kailash*, and in its metaphysical reality this is indeed Meru 'because in time the mystical Meru and the earthly Kailas merged in people's minds. Early wanderers to the source of the four great Indian rivers ... found to their wonder that each one rose near a cardinal point of Kailas' (Thubron 2012: 5). Kailas was later a region of great interest to European and then British explorers of the nineteenth century, who were also obsessed by the wish to find the sources of those four great rivers – the Ganges, the Indus, the Sutlej and the Brahmaputra.

This is a rather tantalizing parallel concept to the perspective of the world in four quadrants held by numerous religious and cultural systems. In Christian (Collins Staff 2011, Genesis 2:8–14) and Judaic traditions (Chabad-Lubavitch Media Centre 2018, Genesis 2:10) the world has a garden or mountain at its centre with four rivers running from it, and the notion of the 'four corners of the earth' is still in daily usage (Collins Staff 2011, Isaiah 11:12). The central garden-mountain and tree are also present in Mesopotamian cosmology – from which derives the Tibetan mandala (Tucci 1961) – and in Akkadian mythology and is familiar to Greek Hyperborean mythology and the Norse image of the world tree, Yggdrasill. Hilda Davidson suggests that this idea of a central pillar or tree was common to early shamanic beliefs in Germanic, northern European and Siberian cultures (1993: 69).

The actual mountain of Kailas suits these liturgical descriptions and is uncannily mandala-like in geography and form. Pradeep Chamaria describes the mountain as 'the most sacred of all the Hindu pilgrimages' for the followers of Siva: 'Hindus regard Mount Kailash as the earthly manifestation of Meru – their spiritual centre of the Universe ... a fantastic World Pillar' (1996: 17).

If the mandala is the depiction of the universe to be contemplated, then Kailas is a unique earthly space in which one can embody and inhabit that unearthly contemplation. Coleman and Elsner suggest that a distinct quality of Kailas is that the inner journey matches the outer (1995: 192), particularly when we consider Govinda's description of the points of the spinal chakra acting as an axis of consciousness, representing Meru (2006: 198).

Kailas has never been summited because to do so would commit grave offence: to the Hindu, the peak is the home of Siva, who sits in eternal meditation with his wife Kali; the mountain forms the centre of Buddhist cosmology, but is also the site of a great contest of the mythical Milarepa with the Bon priest Naro Bonchung.¹ To the ancient Tibetan Bon religion, it is the Axis Mundi and to the Jain it is the place that Rishabhana, equivalent to Shakyamuni, achieved Moksha or enlightenment.

The mountain has four sides, a rare symmetry that is certainly a source of its sacred status: it sits on the earth mandala, below which, in the Buddhist cosmology, are three other mandala hell realms, relating to water, fire and air. Above are the celestial realms.² When pilgrims walk the route, they are absolutely between heaven and hell. The south face of Kailas bears the naturally formed striations of a swastika, a symbol that endured for thousands of years through multiple systems (again Mesopotamian, Chinese and Vedic) as a positive emanation of the auspicious, before it was

¹ As a result of this contest, victorious Milarepa instructed Naro Bonchung that his followers would have to proceed anticlockwise around the mountain, which they do to this day, counter to all others.

² This stacking of planes, from the heavens to the underworld, is also reminiscent of Yggdrasill with worlds existing beneath the three roots and Asgard above (Davidson 1993: 68–70), but Anders Andrén provides a particularly detailed analysis that connects the origins of the 'world tree' and the 'world pillar', even in Christian theologies, and returns them ultimately to early India (Andrén 2014: 27–36).

appropriated by the Nazis. Bearing this symbol naturally, Kailas is unassailable, divine, and the great north face, sheer and magnificent, has still been seen by very few Europeans.

The pilgrim route is circular, remote, arduous and unimaginably rich in the spiritual plane – every face, peak and rock formation of note is replete as an object of devotion figuring in the parallel theologies – but desolate in reality. Therefore, it offers the pilgrim a simultaneous experience of emptiness and fullness, of the physical and spiritual planes respectively; Kailas is the ideal environment to perform penance.

Kailas offers an interlocution of a present reality with a meditational object, of the physical sensory world with the magical and spiritual planes of infinitesimal time, of diachronic and synchronic experience. While the mountain exists in its physical reality, high up in the Himalayan desert, rubble strewn and eschewing any habitual comfort, it exists as a spiritual multiverse, wherein its features and formations are the synchronous manifest points of contact in the theologies of four religions: Bonism, Jainism, Buddhism and Hinduism. I cannot think of another sacred place of shared appropriation, performed with such difference in such peaceful proximity. The only contestation of the space derives from its Chinese governance.

RECONSTRUCTING THE KORA

In my research of Kailas, I have read numerous descriptive texts (Thubron, Allen, Satchidananda, Thurman and Wise, Hooper, Smith) but returned repeatedly to Colin Thubron's moving account of his journey there in *To a Mountain in Tibet* (2012) and Charles Allen's history of its exploration, *A Mountain in Tibet* (2013), both of which interest me because of a more secular aspect. Many of the other texts that I have read, for example by Sri Swami Satchidananda (2010), Pradeep Chamaria (1996) or Robert Thurman and Tad Wise (2000), treat the journey wholly through the religious lens, emphasizing the symbolic spiritual world over the physical. While fascinated by what those texts reveal, I wished to understand the actual physical undertaking, inasmuch as my intention would be finally to undertake it myself. I have one advantage, since I have travelled in Ladakh to the north in similar landscapes and altitudes and experienced Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS), also known as altitude sickness.

The brightness in the high Himalayas is such that automatic cameras return a wholly white image on default settings, and the air is dry, sharp and thin. There is a lack of insects, flora and fauna – this is a high desert. Upon arrival, one very quickly feels drunk with the altitude and sharp headaches are fairly standard. I remember marvelling at packets of snacks for sale that looked inflated to bursting, due to the difference in pressure, and realizing that this was also occurring in my head and in my lungs. No wonder then that there is such a small gap between stamina and exertion. Walking is harder, thinking is harder, communicating is harder, breathing is harder.

What pilgrims do at Kailash is the kora, the circumambulation of the mountain that is a meta-death, a cleansing of sin, a rebirth and a meditation. This walk cannot be taken lightly – as with Everest, pilgrims die annually (I think it might be a fair observation to regard Everest climbers as pilgrims). For the average Westerner, the walk takes up to four days, although devout Tibetans often complete it within twenty-four hours. Most that die are Indian Hindus from the south, who can arrive already exhausted and ill equipped. Since many of these have waited the best part of a lifetime to make the journey, they can also be older.

Leaning heavily on Thubron's account among the others, I will outline the circuit for our reconstructive experience, but we should appreciate that every premonitory, every cave and every significant feature is saturated with meaning and ascribed to deities and stories; when people of different perspectives trek the Kailash kora (or *parikrama*), they experience very different perceptions. They circumambulate the mountain over some thirty-two miles. Some devout Buddhist pilgrims perform the kora by prostration – laying down their body every complete length – which will take at least three weeks. After thirteen circuits, such pilgrims can walk the inner kora, a shorter but more dangerous path approaching the south face.

The circumambulation begins at Darchen, where yaks and support can be hired – the settlement is monitored by the Chinese. Nowadays the presence of the Chinese army is the dominating factor – pilgrims are scrutinized and gatherings monitored closely. A track leads through initial outcrops to the ‘first *chaksal gang* of the kora, a platform for ritual prostration’ (Thubron 2012: 148). There are four *chaksal gang*, at each corner of the mountain, forming the living mandala. The walk descends to the valley of the Lha River, flanking Kailas west and north. Over another hill there is a huge natural amphitheatre where pilgrims gather, particularly in the month of Saga Dawa (Buddha’s enlightenment and parinirvana).

Thubron returns to camp by the River Lha, discarding heavy items for a 3,500-foot ascent in the morning. The river is the true start of the kora at the arch of the Kangri Chorten and from here pilgrims proceed through the meadows as the cliff walls close in, sprinkled with hermit caves. Kailas towers in the north-east. It is considered auspicious to pass through the middle of the chorten. I have read before of the phenomenon of pilgrims passing their body through enclosed or gated spaces at sacred sites, under objects, through gaps. There are accounts of this liminal action in Rome for example, as pilgrims would crawl beneath the pedestal of a huge obelisk in St Peter’s Square, or beneath the pillars raising Saint Thomas à Becket’s tomb at Canterbury (Hooper 2002: 30). There are pagan examples such as that of the *Mên-an-Tol* (literally ‘stone with hole’) in Cornwall, through which people still crawl for back cures and fertility. Children used to be passed through it to cure rickets. At Kailas it is considered auspicious to walk through the chorten, or, if not, to circumambulate it three times. It strikes me that passing through the enclosed space, though, feels that it cannot then be undone, because it is a threshold, a gate and is therefore liminoid (Turner 1982). It is undoable because to pass through it again, even in the opposite direction, is simply to pass through it again – one cannot undo passing through an enclosed gateway! I feel something here at some deep, perhaps obsessively compulsive level; is this not part of the issue with passing under ladders? But there are some places where the irrevocable would feel desirable and these are usually of spiritual significance, if not religious. We wish to feel that our passing through these spaces is something inscribed, that we have done it, that what is done is not to be undone. Those that emerge realize something that the uninitiated only imagine. For Turner, this is reflective of Van Gennep’s theory: initiation by separation, transition and (re)incorporation (24).

Tad Wise describes listening to his companion, Robert Thurman, as they descend from their Kailas kora, referring to Lama Govinda’s description of the ‘brothers and sisters of Kailash’:

Wherein all of us who have travelled to and around Kailash have an unspoken understanding and can recognise ‘having seen Kailash’ in each other – and are so joined in a holy mountain family, who see the world differently ever after. (2000: 274)

Again this phenomenon of communion is not true just of Kailas, but arguably it is the result of any extreme experience in the company of others. It conjures Durkheim too, because it speaks of a shift from the profane to the sacred; a separation that returns the initiate to their life altered spiritually (Durkheim 2008: 36–42).

Thubron passes next into the valley of Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light and arrives at the first of four hermitages. Crossing a low bridge, pilgrims climb to Choku Gompa. The hermitage is recently rebuilt. There are four of these high hermitage gompas around the kora, all rebuilt after destruction in the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

Leaving the first hermitage at the Kailas kora, the way continues for five miles through a corridor of 3,000-foot sandstone, fracturing the skyline into pinnacles. Features of the mountain landscape are named for saints or likenesses, such as the fortress of the ‘Hindu demon Ravana, converted to Buddhism’ (Thubron 2012: 174), the likeness of Hanuman the monkey god, ‘the tail of the wonderful horse Gesar of Ling, Tibet’s epic King’ (175) and so on it goes. The process of veneration forms a close reading of the mountain as actual text; as Thubron puts it, ‘everywhere, for those with sight, the stone throbs with life’ (175).

Buddhist, Bon and Hindu deities ‘throng the path [–] thousands of them’ – but all are somehow made present corporeally by their geological manifestations (175). Over a century ago a Kagyu monk produced a pilgrim guide that is itself so saturated as to be impossible to separate the reality of route

from the meta-reality of the symbolic world. For the Bonpa that walk the anticlockwise route, the way is infused with the footprints of their saints; they see their religion as the primal root of later religions. Given the age of Buddhism, Bonism defies cultural memory. Bonpa followers think of Buddha as an incarnation of Shenrab, an older but similarly enlightened figure.

At the end of the Amitabha Pass, the way opens and the west face of Kailas looms with sheer imminence. The valley climbs steeply and as it shifts north-east, the sandstone gives way to black granite, but this does not end the anthropomorphic identification of natural features. The second chaksal gang prostration platform faces the rock footprint of Buddha with which he nailed Kailas to the earth. The path turns eastwards and the western face is replaced with another, 'more awesome and absolute' (185). Thubron's party climb up past Drira Phuk Gompa to sleep in tents against the snow, acclimatizing at 17,000 feet. The next day they cross a basin of snow and the walk becomes harder, steeper.

The walk climbs vertiginously to the Vajra Yogini burial ground. It is the burial place, not of corpses, but of previous lives – it is where pilgrims practise death, often laying still among the rocks. Here something is left, often something precious to the pilgrim because 'nothing cherished endures' (197). This is at the heart of the kora now, this is where ritual death occurs before a 1,000-foot climb to the daunting Dolma La Pass at 18,600 feet, where pilgrims can be released into a new life.

The burial ground provides a vibrant example of what Douglas Davies talks about as he reflects on ritual death. Acknowledging Van Gennep's *Rites of Passage* (1908), he observes that death is such a universally powerful human experience that it is employed symbolically for other cultural journeys involving initiation, wherein one context of life must end for another to begin (Davies 2002).

Applying Davies' comments to pilgrimage, the contexts of the past and the future are liminalizing, as one passes through stages of the towards, the transcendent and the emergent. In this idea is also therefore a rebirth that necessitates the meta-death en route. At Kailas this is epitomized by the symbolic burial ground, littered as it is with objects of lives – clothes, bags, hair and teeth of people – where pilgrims even practise the very mimesis of a corpse. This is not without a silent violence, the softness and fragility of bodies subject to the elements juxtaposed by the sharp, jagged chaos of rocks. The strewing of material objects, of the body and otherwise, faces the fact of entropy, of disintegration towards emptiness. If we consider the efficacy of a conquest of the everyday by the transcendental, the implicit violence can be read as an example of Maurice Bloch's theory of *rebounding violence* (1991). Western traditions are not so very far removed historically: Hooper describes a shrine on a cliff at Rocamadour near Conques in France, reached via a steep climb and visited in pilgrimage by Henry II in 1170, the same year as the martyrdom of Thomas à Becket. The shrine was covered in tufts and locks of hair cut from pilgrims, gesturing to the tale of a woman who cut her hair to be saved by the Virgin (Hopper 2002). The connection here is the shedding of ego or vanity, or a relinquishment or conquest of Self.

I have found it interesting that even in the journalistic and secular journeys of writers following routes such as Kailas, their thoughts dwell in the grief of loss and the journey offers the same transformative consequence as for the pilgrim. Thubron's journey to Kailas is also a moving account of his coming to terms with age and the loss of his loved ones:

A tightness opens in my stomach. I want to touch hands that I know have gone cold. The air feels thin. Where are you? Among the graves of an English churchyard.... You exist now in the timbre of my voice. (2012: 142)

And in the following quote, the death of his brother:

Trekkers at high altitude sometimes sense a person walking a few paces behind them, just out of sight. Often, this person is dead. I never feel this but once or twice I imagine a person walking a little ahead of me.... I am only nineteen and I am mourning, selfishly, the person you would have been for me. (203)

It is as if the power of removal is also the power of connection. We stand, stencilled from a different world into a massive and spiritually embalmed landscape, the body is pitted against igneous primeval rock, the feet repeat their movement on unforgiving surfaces and inclines, the breath shows itself in

cold and thin air and is heard. Old pains grow intense, as does the pull of strap, the weight of packs. Blisters form and muscles strain – thighs and calves stiffen with soreness in mornings following cold and uncomfortable nights. Days are intensely bright, nights are deepest black. In all of this, the mind stands increasingly at a relative and objective distance from the constructions of self, culture, family, home and increasingly faces the naked truths of mortality itself. We might experience something of this even in a weekend hike from Llangollen to Loggerheads – the satisfaction of a cold and tiring hike in the midst of a beautiful, huge landscape – but the pilgrimage is long and allows for a much deeper, literally more exhaustive process. We face the mountain, we face ourself.

In a circumambulation such as Kailas, there is a point at which the way back is the way forwards. Tad Wise describes it thus, as he approaches the same ‘burial ground’ at Kailas:

Sickness, fear and trembling. It's not human up here.... My entire body proceeds to yell at me – not just my head, heart, stomach, weak knees, and tingling tongue, but my kidneys, thighs, dead fingers, and these wobbly Styrofoam feet – joining in a silent chorus, warning: ‘Big mistake ... return to sender ... go back!’ (Thurman and Wise 2000: 204)

Wise has brought a picture of his baby girl to place at the site and struggles to do such a thing; to face one's own mortality and the memory of the lost is one thing, but to face one's children's mortality reveals the suffering and responsibility of love, acutely clarified in this place, a truth too terrible.

After the burial ground, the walk rises to a huge boulder field, ‘a monochrome limbo’ and reaches 18,600 feet, which is 3,000 feet higher than Everest base camp – a human being cannot survive here. The path swerves upwards to a final ascent. Pilgrims heave for air. This is the axis beyond which pilgrims shift into purity, are reborn. Many pilgrims, often lowland Hindus, cannot make it to this place and some do indeed die en route – some bodies remain in crevices and hollows hereabout. At this highest elevation there is the tarn (pool) of Gaurikund, just below the path, frozen for half the year and where the bathing of Parvati seduced Siva in Hindu theology. The hardest Hindu pilgrims clamber down and, having broken the ice, bathe themselves in the water for sacred blessings, often associated with fertility – Satchidananda describes one of his own party passing out with the shock of this (2010:104).

The path then drops in an almost vertical descent through jagged crags, but what follows is the softening of a valley, a river and a return, venerating the meditation cave of the hero sage Milarepa before completing the kora.

Thubron completes his kora as a secular observer, but there is a consistently introspective quality to his writing, considering death and grief throughout (see above). It is clear that he is as much a pilgrim as any other, and the necessity of the journey remains as an intrinsic activation in Thubron's final proximity to the spiritual object of his travel. I won't presume to know that object, and indeed he told the Jaipur Literature Festival in 2016 that there was no epiphany at 18,600 feet. But he also said that he felt consequently stilled and cleansed.

KAILAS AS A MAGNETIC GEOGRAPHY

While I feel no compulsion to climb Everest, I feel a strong desire to circumambulate Kailas. But reaching Kailas is a complex process of negotiation both political, bureaucratic and indeed physical and it exists as any other mountainous region: a dogged, steep and potentially deadly terrain, rocky streams, boulder fields, precipices, caverns, scree.

Earnest pilgrims, across many religions, convey themselves according to basic need, but a lack of prior understanding of conditions both en route and at Kailas leads to mortal danger. Pilgrimage contains penitence and the experience of one's body is at the core of that – the body is the front line of pilgrimage, even if it is the mind that is its object. Simplicity in the facilitation of physical need is directly relative to both the indulgences gained and the potential for spiritual realization. Many Hindu pilgrims travel up from the southern plains of India, in cottons and sandals or otherwise non-technical clothing.

Thubron wrote a *Guardian* article in which he recounts encounters with several who had turned back, haunted by the devastation of their parties and even the death of some. They lament their shock at the cold, the arduousness of the climb, being poorly equipped and feel anger that they had passed medical tests required to join their organized trips out of India. Many say that they had no idea. One woman expresses anger at 'unscrupulous' tour companies, explaining that 'they'll enrol anyone. They just want the money. The people who sign up don't know how hard it will be' (Thubron 2011: n.p.). As I wrote this in July 2018, international reports emerged of 1,500 Indian pilgrims trapped by weather en route to Kailas, with two having died (First Post 2018: n.p). In 2016, seven *yatris* (pilgrims) had died on the same route.

Any traditional understanding of the pilgrimage could be described as teleological: a journey that tests the physical and mental spirit, drawing magnetically towards a final space or objective of spiritual significance. The journey explains the end. The sacred space is not charged just in its latent materiality, in its stones or altars, but it is within the heart and mind of the pilgrim – this charging comes from the exertion of energy on the journey, from the difficulty endured. When we experience the catharsis of arrival, it derives from the equation of time and space crossed, difficulty endured and the importance to the visitor of the place or person visited.

The whole circumnavigation of Kailas constitutes the arrival, since the mountain is itself the venue. Many pilgrims therefore will have endured a much longer journey in order to arrive and by the time they do, at the great Lake Mansarovar,³ to the south of Kailas, many are already exhausted, sore and low on provisions; they are, however, more likely to be adequately acclimatized than those bussed in.

Sri Swami Satchidananda describes his feeling of coming close to death, on his pilgrimage in 1957, even before they reach Kailas, as the shock of walking into the gales and snows of the Tibetan plain take them by surprise. Six decades later, waiting to cross a border bridge, Thubron hears that they are bringing the body of a pilgrim down from Kailas:

A squad of porters trudges into sight, bearing the corpse on an old army stretcher. Three Indian elders walk alongside, but nobody seems moved. The man, apparently, died alone.... Casually, the body is tipped onto the canvas, the face covered by a brown cloth. A plump hand dangles loose, its wrist encircled by a golden watch. (2012: 107)

Thubron walks in from Simikot in Nepal, a seven- to nine-day trek roughly following the route of the Karnali River. He describes the shift in this journey from pined foothills, laden with wild flowers, to stark and scree-covered barren mountains, wherein villagers struggle to grow barley, a feature I remembered well from the period spent recovering from AMS, staying with a family in the ancient settlement of Alchi, Ladakh. Thubron's journey to the border is slow and accompanied by the constancy of the sheer, snow-lit wall of the high Himalayas, the impossible barrier to Tibet. Even the Tibetans are aware of the isolation of this barrier, epitomizing it in their own mythology of Shambala. A paradise city lost somewhere to the north of Kailas, Shambala is the Tibetan metaphor for its own inaccessibility. When I travelled to Ladakh, I flew over the high Himalayan range and literally wept with awe at its seemingly endless immensity, peaks piercing even the high cirriform clouds of the troposphere. It was immense and unfolded as far as I could see even from 30,000 feet. Europeans, while barred from Tibet, considered it an arcane, occult and 'exalted sanctuary' (Thubron 2012: 31). In his 1933 novel, *Lost Horizon* (adapted by Capra to film in 1937), James Hilton refers to Shangri-La, again as an inaccessible Himalayan paradise (Hilton 2015). The inaccessibility perpetuates the idea that reality is not quite the same once we transcend that mountain barrier, that we move beyond the hegemony of a physical phenomenological reality and into a simultaneously symbolic and spiritual realm.

³ Mansarovar is one of two lakes, the other being Rakshar Tal, to the south of Kailas. It is also a sacred site of pilgrimage, ringed with the ancient caves of religious hermits, the ruins of monasteries. The aspect of water is liminoid and the shallows of Mansarovar can be bathed in ritually by Hindu pilgrims, before their circumambulation of Kailas.

In that place of the spirit, the pilgrim experience requires a failure of the mind and body in the process of forging a new perspective, determination and realization. In this is also the collapse of ego, which is why the value of exhaustion and simplicity far outweighs that of comfort and rest. For the devotee, these qualities can be dangerously close to masochism; at Kailas, as with other key sites of pilgrimage, the greatest indulgences are earned through a deliberated physical suffering – for example in the completion of the route by prostration – even while the noble truths of Buddhism intend to reduce it. Here again is Bloch's idea of a ritual violence (1991), albeit a peaceful violence if that is not a contradiction; can there be such a thing as a peaceful violence?

But, then perhaps a mountain has always been the place where we exhaust ourselves physically, reset ourselves mentally, place the softness of our mortality against the hard and brutal, shattering certainty of rock in an environment wherein our senses – texture, sound, temperature, sight, smell and even taste – are engaged extremely. It seems peaceful, but on closer inspection it contains a violence that we find vital. As I write this conclusion at my desk, I take a break, switch on the radio and hear that a climber on Snowdon, 50 miles from me, has suffered a broken leg in an avalanche. Perhaps 'peaceful' is wrong for a mountain – a 'stillness' is more accurate and I realize that the magnetism for me, at some deeper level, probably refers to my grandfather's death as his bomber crashed into a mountain in 1944, the violence of the moment being replaced by the stillness that followed and the whole event written in my imagination, not my memory. As with Thubron and Wise, I imagine that my outer conquest of the burial ground at Kailas would refer to an inner conquest much closer to home, while the cleansing stillness of the mountain stands as metre to the subjectivity of a life in constant change.

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