

Pilgrimage to Mount Kailash

SWAMI DAMODARANANDA

Swami Damodarananda was a senior and venerable monk of the Ramakrishna Order. This article recounts the hardships and rewards of his pilgrimage to Mount Kailash undertaken some sixty years ago. His narrative is a valuable documentation of the challenges one faces in the Himalayan terrain especially when, six decades ago, the present day gadgets and amenities were unheard of. His vivid description of the traditional route to the holy mountain adds to its historicity. This article was first published in the April-May 2014 issues of the Prabuddha Bharata, the monthly journal from Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, Uttarakhand. The reproduction of the article is in keeping with the earnest wish of the author to have this published in the Vedanta Kesari as well—before his sudden demise in July 2014 at Belur Math.

This is a story, after about sixty years, of my walking all the way to Mount Kailash and back.

Every religion has its prophets, saints, sages, sacred places, and holy days of special worship. Devotees of all religions do pilgrimages as an act of purification. These acts are accompanied with prayers, worship, and meditation. Bharata, that is India, is filled with many sacred places—from Kanyakumari in the south, to Kamakhya in the east; from Badrinath-Kedarnath in the north, to Dwarkanath-Somnath in the west; and Vishvanath at Varanasi sits in the centre. Thus lakhs of devotees, since ancient times, have availed of the ample opportunities to offer their devotions to the innumerable sacred places dedicated to God in the form of thousands of gods and goddesses. Pilgrimages and prayers lead one to a better and nobler life, with deeper spiritual insights and perceptions. In a way, a pilgrimage reflects the journey, often hard, of human life to its goal—God.

In 1947, after the partition of India, I returned as a refugee along with the others,

from our Lahore centre, which is now in Pakistan. Posted to the Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, Vrindavan, I was trained to offer seva, service, in almost all the hospital departments. I finally ended up being a radiologist.

Badrinath

In 1952 there arose in me a strong desire to go on a pilgrimage to Badrinath, also known as Badri-Narayana, and Kedarnath. I requested Swami Madhavananda, the then General Secretary, permission to fulfil my desire. Revered Maharaj did grant me permission, after a brief exchange of correspondence, through Swami Kripananda, head of the Sevashrama. I began preparing for the pilgrimage by collecting warm clothing, a stout lathi, stick, a kamandalu, sadhu's water pot, and so on. Sometime in July or thereabouts I started from Vrindavan for New Delhi and from there to Haridwar and Rishikesh.

At Rishikesh revered Jagabandhu Maharaj, Swami Nityatmananda, was doing Tapasya in one of our kutiās, huts. I was fortunate to

stay with him for three or four days. Before leaving I requested him to bless me so that by Sri Ramakrishna's grace I should have a safe, enjoyable, and fruitful *yatra*, journey. The swami immediately reminded me that both Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother, being on our right and left side respectively, are ever protecting and looking after us. This holy attitude further fortified my love and devotion for Sri Thakur and Sri Ma. In retrospect, it helped give me a deeper spiritual insight and safely brought me back to Bharata, the divine spiritual land, after a terribly difficult *yatra* facing unforeseen deadly circumstances and problems.

The next day I crossed the Laxman Jhulla Bridge at Rishikesh to start my climb through the winding mountain roads. I slowly made my way up and down the mountains and reached Vashistha Guha, where our Swami Purushottamananda, a disciple of Swami Brahmananda, was staying. Having stayed with him for a day or so, and after receiving his blessing, I moved onwards and upwards. At every ten to fifteen miles one came across a *chatti*, rest house. These *chattis* were equipped with the simple facilities for shelter, provisions, cooking, eating, and sleeping.

Somewhere, as suggested by friends, I branched off at Govind Ghat to go to Hemkund Lokpal, the huge holy lake where

Govind Singh, the tenth Sikh Guru, meditated for spiritual illumination. There was a small Gurudwara near the glacier and the freezing lake where no one lived. I could hear the ice on the mountain cracking and falling into the huge lake. The icy water was flowed down through a stream.

As I was returning from there, I happened to pass through a vast area of natural wild flowers called the Valley of Flowers. The sight of a staggering variety of flowers, medicinal herbs, and roots was so powerful that even now, after all these decades, it flashes forth and is quite fresh in my mind.

I returned to the main road leading to the Badrinath shrine, reaching in due course Joshi Math, or Jyotir Math, one of the four Maths established by Acharya Shankara. He established this Math for the dissemination of Vedanta in the northern parts of India. The other Maths Acharya Shankara established are at Puri in the east, Dwarka in the west, and Sringeri in the south.

Badrinath

Finally, moving upwards from Joshi Math, I reached Badrinath within a day or two. It is situated on the banks of the Alakananda River, a tributary of the Ganga. It is said that the image of Badri-Narayana was thrown into the river by the Buddhists and Buddha's

Valley of Flowers

image was installed in its place. When later Acharya Shankara arrived at Badrinath he discovered, through his spiritual insight, the image of Narayana lying in the Alakananda, further purifying the holy water of the Ganga. The Acharya immediately made all arrangements to lift the Bhagavan's image and reinstall it. This was done with all due Vedic rites by priests especially brought from the Malabar area in South India. This tradition still continues and hence the temple priests are brahmanas from Malabar.

Every morning I used to bathe in the tank called *tapta-kunda*, a hot water spring, which issues out of the ground. After bathing I would go straight to the temple and sit on one of the built-in stone benches, constructed on both sides of the temple prayer hall. I used to sit opposite the learned priests who repeated the *Vishnu Sahasranama Stotra*. With prayer book in hand I would join them in the recitation. This sacred recitation went on throughout the *abhishekam*, holy bath, of the image of Narayana. The *abhishekam* consist of *pancha-amrita*—milk, curds, ghee, honey, and sugar. Finally, everything is washed away by pouring pure water to keep the holy image clean and sparkling. Then detailed decorations followed with sandal paste, colour, various perfumes, clothes, ornaments, and flowers. After this ceremony the screen was drawn aside, as the deity was ready to receive the devotees' darshan.

In most of the pilgrim places situated in the Himalayas, free food is offered to the visiting monks by various charitable organizations. The most famous among them is 'Kali Kamliwala

Chhatra'. I used to stand in the queue, along with the other visiting monks, for the *bhiksha*, holy alms. In the evening as well we would obtain supper, which we then took to our *kutias* where we could eat at leisure.

Kedarnath

From Badrinath I began walking through dangerous terrain towards Kedarnath, the abode of Shiva on the banks of the Mandakini River, another tributary of the Ganga. It is at a higher altitude than Badrinath and also much colder. The snow-capped peaks are just a little further away behind the temple. Once, when I dared to walk in the evening towards the glaciers, I saw a sadhu sitting and meditating. This was dangerous as a cold wind was blowing. Unless the constitution is very strong, one might end up in deep absorption and enter final samadhi. Hence, in such situations it is always safer to meditate inside one's room or the Shiva temple.

Being anxious to earn more *punya*, merit, one day at about ten in the morning I went down to bathe in the Mandakini. I knew full



An archival picture of Kedarnath

well that the water was too cold—minus 10 or 20 degrees centigrade. I thought I could have a quick dip and come out. But once I jumped in and was in the freezing waters, my body became numb. At that time the only thought was to save myself by coming out of the water before I froze. Somehow, with ebbing strength, I emerged out of the water by the grace of Kedareshwara Mahadeva—Shiva—and was saved from the terrible calamity of freezing into *mahasamadhi* in the Mandakini.

After this incident I was inspired to spend more time with Shiva in the temple—praying, meditating, and reciting hymns. Thus enjoying my ever-inspiring holy pilgrimage, I returned to Badrinath after a few days planning for my *yatra* to Mount Kailash.

Meanwhile, I joined some pilgrims that were going to the Tunganath Mahadeva temple, to the east of Badrinath. This temple was also established by Acharya Shankara when he was discovering the sacred shrines in the Himalayas. This temple is one of the *Pancha-Kedars*, five Kedar temples; situated at the height of about 12,000 feet it is the highest among the five Shiva temples. I found it to be very scarcely populated. The altitude and freezing cold dissuades people from living there. Only those appointed for temple work and its management stayed there, apart from the few pilgrims, despite all the difficulties.

Towards Tibet

After visiting and offering obeisance to Badrinath, Kedarnath, and Tunganath, I set out for holy Kailash and Manasarovar. I was told that there were two passes to enter Tibet. One near Badrinath called Mana Pass and the other called Niti Pass. Mana Pass is at a very high altitude, and pilgrims opting to go through it have to face a lot of difficulties while climbing the steep slopes. As such I

was advised to go through the Niti Pass, which being lower was easier to negotiate, but would entail an extra week of travel. Another attraction of this route for me was that on the way there is Kalpeshvara Shiva temple, situated at the height of about 7,200 feet.

I prepared *chattu*, powdered fried Bengal gram, to last me for about a week. *Chattu* has to be taken along with water and salt. I took this, along with fruits if available, when I became hungry. Thus I walked along a narrow stream through cultivated terraced fields, higher and higher, finally reaching the small temple of Kalpeshvara Shiva. It seemed some saints had performed Tapasya there earlier.

After offering my prayers at the temple and seeing a house nearby, I slowly made my way towards it. It consisted of one big room. Different items required for the simple house were kept in different corners of the house. Only one woman was there suckling her baby, who was lying on the lap, and at the same time cooking at the hearth in the centre of the house. A steel plate for baking bread was placed on it. She was preparing rotis without a rolling pin, expertly stretching the dough with both her hands. As she placed the *phulka* on the plate, it began baking and puffing up, the woman offered the hot flattened bread to me saying in Hindi, 'Baba-lo', Baba please take! She also gave me a preparation of some vegetables to go along with the *phulkas*.

After eating the *bhiksha* I thanked and took leave of her to climb higher in the mountains. Thus I walked on and on up and down the mountains, through one terraced hill of cultivation to the next, but always higher and higher.

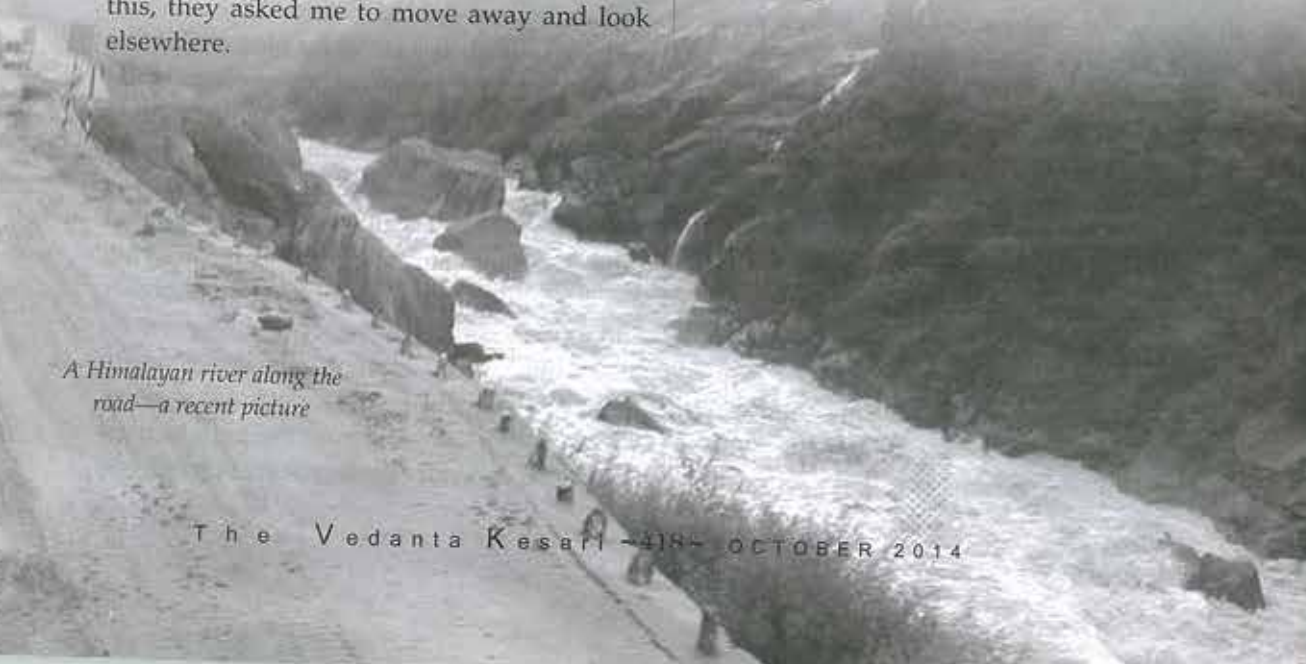
There were very few pilgrims going to Mount Kailash during those days. I was alone, walking along, not knowing the path to cross over to Tibet. Under these circumstances I was

told to follow the shepherds with flocks of goats and sheep. These shepherds inhabited the mountainous regions bordering India and Tibet. During the summer they work as tradesmen, plying their trade between India and Tibet. They were hardy and used to climbing high altitudes and precipitous mountain paths with ease. These rugged and brave people were used to facing all sorts of unusual challenges. Their principal vocation was to rear sheep, goats, yaks, mules, and horses, which they used for carrying heavy loads of articles such as rice, dal, salt, and other household needs and articles. They also traded in beads and other items used by women as ornaments, as these items were not available in Tibet. They pack these articles in jute bags and carry them on the backs of animals to Tibet. In exchange they bring to India rolls of wool, packed on both sides of the mules and horses for feeding the woollen mills of North India, which prepare woollen garments.

So I joined one such group of traders and, halting for a day, rested in their tents. I was kindly given a corner to rest. Of course I ate my *chattu* with water and salt while they ate meat by killing one of the old or weak animals—either sheep or goat. As they did this, they asked me to move away and look elsewhere.

Thus climbing on to higher altitudes, we reached the Indian police check post. The last climb before the check post was very steep. Even the yaks and horses were panting! No one is allowed to go to Tibet without permission from the Indian Government. The police asked me for the permit. I told them that I was a pilgrim to Kailash and Manasarovar. They doubted me because I was a young monk of thirty-five years. They thought that I was a communist in a monk's garb, trying to escape to China for getting indoctrination and training in communistic ideas. I told them my name and that I belonged to the Ramakrishna Mission, presently serving at the Sevashrama at Vrindavan. I also showed them a letter addressed to me, care of the Sevashrama in Vrindavan.

Finally, being convinced of my genuineness, they allowed me to continue across the border. They told me however to return to India by the same Niti Pass. But, as circumstances unfolded in the course of my pilgrimage, I had to return to India through a different route, the precipitous Hoti Pass. I reached the Tibetan plateau with my shepherds friends and crossed the Tibetan check Post.



A Himalayan river along the road—a recent picture

The Tibetan Plateau and Mandi

The Dalai Lama ruled from Lhasa. There were ancient cultural and other ties between the two countries. India was loosely governing the Tibetans, perhaps mostly due to the Hindu pilgrims going every year to Mount Kailash.

The Tibetan plateau is the highest in the world, covering a vast land. The average altitude of the plateau is 10,000 feet above sea level. I began walking onwards along with the shepherds, who were doing business with the Tibetans, supplying them with several items they carried from the foothills of the Himalayas to the plateau of Tibet.

From the Tibetan check post we proceeded further to reach a *mandi*, temporary summer market place, where Indian goods were being exchanged for wool. All exchanges were done according to the barter system. Wool was the only wealth of Tibet exchangeable for Indian goods. There were many tents in that summer bazar. Fortunately there was no rain and the sun was bright. In this weather the Tibetans came from various parts to exchange their goods. It was the once-in-a-year opportunity to trade.

I was in one of the tents where business with the Tibetans was going on. There a young man came to exchange some goods with the Indian trader. I saw the young man's eyes were red. I realized he had an eye infection. Since I was working in the Vrindavan Eye Hospital, I had carried a first-aid box for use in case of emergency. Working in the hospital had given me knowledge about the use of medicines. My first-aid box contained some antibiotic tablets, sulphanilamide powder, and some medicine for eye problems.

I wanted to help this young man by giving some medicines, which I conveyed to the tradesman as he knew the Tibetan language. I explained that his eyes had become

red because of some infection and that I had medicines that I could give him. He should apply the medicine three times a day. The Tibetan looked at me and told me through the tradesman that he would go to his tent and be back.

In a little while the man returned with a leather bundle, which he offered to me in exchange of the medicines. The Indian trader explained to me that Tibetans do not accept anything freely given by sadhus, that they would like to give me something in return, for what the young man had brought a gift shaped like a football in a leather bag. The 'football' was nothing but sheep or yak or goat's butter, which does not melt due to the cold and the leather package. I accepted the leather bag and the young man accepted the medicines and bid me goodbye by saying 'namaste'. Tibet, being a Buddhist country, has much respect for monks and has developed a sense of charity that is part of their religion and daily life.

In general Buddhists are very generous and charitable. The attitude of the young man bears testimony to this fact. Here I may mention another incident that happened when I was going to Mandalay, the old capital of Burma. I was travelling by boat on the river Irawati. It was lunch time and a Burmese mother, a fellow traveller, came to me and did pranams. She conveyed in gestures, as I did not know her language, to take lunch. As I had eaten to my full, I had no desire to eat then, which I conveyed to her again in signs, thanking her for her offering by doing namaste. I want to reiterate here that Buddhist people are very hospitable and charitable to monks and nuns, whichever denomination he or she may belong to.

I met some Tibetans who told me that there was a great holy place in a town called Manglang. It was a Buddhist pilgrim centre

situated in the extreme west of the Tibetan plateau. I was told that on the eastern part of the Tibetan plateau is located the holy Manasarovar Lake and Mount Kailash. After obtaining some more information about the route, I set out to the western part of Tibet to reach Manglang. Since it was a beaten track, I had no difficulty in finding the way, except for walking long hours. I was alone and did not see any human beings—only goats, sheep, and yaks. The whole place was barren.

Around seven in the evening I reached the Buddhist temple in Manglang. As soon as I entered the temple the monks saw me. They welcomed and offered me cheese and sheep milk, which is available in plenty, along with salted hot tea. Their way of making cottage cheese is very simple: by exposing the goat's or sheep's milk in the scorching sun it gets split into whey and cheese. Due to heat the water

evaporates and the cheese is thus naturally formed. Since I was a vegetarian, they gave me cheese with the salted tea available always in the tents and temples. As that is a cold country, they did not drink water and instead drank salted tea.

After filling my stomach and getting over my tiredness, I went to the temple. I saw there a huge Buddha statue twenty feet high, seated on a chair, as it were. Surrounding this huge Buddha image they had decorated small images of Buddha in a meditative posture.

Everywhere and in every corner in the huge temple, between the images, plenty of manuscripts in Tibetan were lying here and there along with smaller Buddha images. I asked them about the manuscripts and they told me that they were manuscripts of Buddhism. So I rested there and meditated in that huge temple.

(To be continued...)

Awed by the Himalayas!

I had lost myself at the sight of the lofty snow clad mountain rock of Kedarnath. I, therefore, did not notice the surroundings. I did not know where I had been sitting all along. I had lost my 'I'ness as it were. It is indeed almost impossible to put down in words how I was feeling. I thought that I had seen whatever there was to be seen anywhere. After a while I regained my consciousness and I found myself seated on a carpet of fresh fragrant flowers. All the surrounding area was covered with beds of flowers. I was intently looking at this beautiful natural surroundings. I was almost looking like a king seated on a rich throne bedecked with precious jewels. It was indeed an indescribable situation.

I was now present at one of the supernal spots on this earth. The King of the Mountains was unfolding his glory before me and I was viewing it with a peace-filled mind. I painfully realized that while I had been viewing the Himalayas so far my eyes never penetrated the outer crust. But now I was in his lap and was amazed by his glory. I remembered Arjuna standing stupefied before Sri Krishna showing him His all-comprehensive form (Viswarupa). Himalaya really appears here as a symbol of the great God—the Master of the Universe. I was almost convinced that the same Universal Spirit, which is beyond the comprehension of human senses, which controls every thing in the universe and which resides in the core of every being, has manifested Itself in this huge form. How else could a man, with his limited intelligence and cloudy vision, have a glimpse of the divine? This was all due to His compassion.

—Swami Akhandananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna

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SWAMI DAMODARANANDA

(Continued from the previous issue. . .)

Swami Damodarananda was a senior and venerable monk of the Ramakrishna Order. This article recounts the hardships and rewards of his pilgrimage to Mount Kailash undertaken some sixty years ago. His narrative is a valuable documentation of the challenges one faces in the Himalayan terrain especially when, six decades ago, the present day gadgets and amenities were unheard of. His vivid description of the traditional route to the holy mountain adds to its historicity. This article was first published in the April-May 2014 issues of the Prabuddha Bharata, the monthly journal from Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, Uttarakhand. The reproduction of the article is in keeping with the earnest wish of the author to have this published in the Vedanta Kesari as well—before his sudden demise in July 2014 at Belur Math.

Later the next day I stared eastward and thus I was once again alone. I was told to go only on the beaten track and not to enter any side road. After covering some distance alone, I came across a Brahmachari wearing white clothes belonging to the Sikh religion. He had also come to Tibet on a *yatra* to Kailash. We started travelling together. There were no horse, tents, and the land was all barren. Whatever little food we had in the form of cheese we ate, but did not find any person on the way.

Towards Mount Kailash

Steadily we advanced through the Tibetan plateau till the sunlight disappeared. There was no shelter to spend the night in. We had to spend the night on the road itself. We separately spread out sheets on the ground and on 3 sides arranged stones about 2 feet high and covered that with another sheet and weighted it down with some more stones. Somehow we tried to sleep in that makeshift tent, but we could not sleep because of the

cold and howling winds. We were lucky that no pack of wolves or wild dogs attacked us at night. We were told that if such packs attack they eat humans too.

Getting up early we again started walking eastwards towards our destination—the holy Manasarovar and Kailash.

Tibetan Dog Incident

Once when I was walking alone I saw a Tibetan shepherd with about two-hundred sheep and goats. I thought of obtaining food from him to eat. I called out from a distance and he heard me. His flock of sheep were all sleeping. I cried out loudly, '*khi-khi; dog-dog*' in Tibetan. These dogs accompany shepherds to protect the sheep from packs of wolves. I wanted him to control his big sheepdog.

Suddenly the big sheepdog ran towards me. I was helpless as I did not have a stick. The dog attacked me and as I fell, bit me on my thigh and ran away. My clothes were torn and luckily the bite was not deep. The dog must have been old with worn out teeth. Here

my first-aid kit and knowledge of medicines helped me to treat myself under these adverse circumstances. Though I did not have any untoward incident due to this dog bite, later, when I returned to India, at our Kishanpur centre, I had to take thirteen injections around my stomach to counter the dog bite.

Undeterred by the bite, I continued my journey towards my destination. The Sikh Brahmachari who accompanied me in the beginning, disappeared somewhere along the way.

Drinking Buttermilk

As I walked on a sunny day I became quickly very tired. Feeling very thirsty I stopped at a house and asked for buttermilk. As I waited the owner of the house went inside and brought out a leather bag. It looked like a leather bag that is used in carrying and distributing water in arid places. The man shook the bag before opening it. As he was opening it what was a hissing sound 'shooo'—like one hears when aerated cold drink bottles are opened.

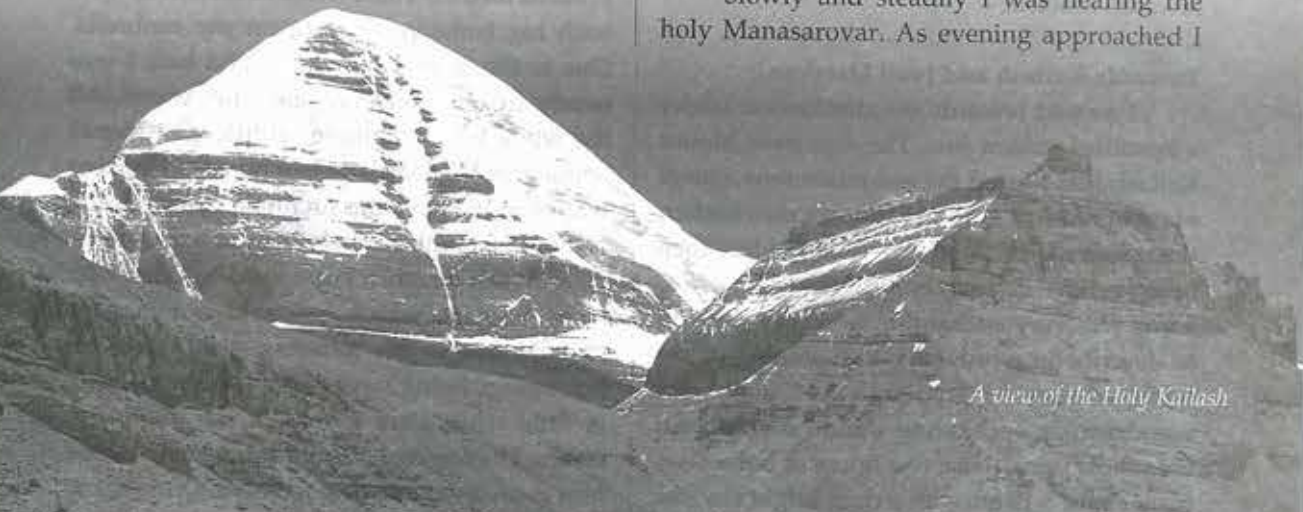
He poured the buttermilk into my drinking vessel. I found in it many hairs of

yak or goats floating on the surface. I used my fingers to pick and throw them out. As I was about to drink it, a rancid smell was coming out of the buttermilk. Under normal circumstances I would not have consumed such bad-smelling buttermilk. But as I was very tired and thirsty I forced myself to drink it. I closed my nostrils with my fingers and drank that without demur.

Here I was reminded of a Sanskrit saying attributed to sage Vishvamitra: '*Jivitam maranam shreya, jivana dharman avapnuyat*; it is better to live than to die, because by living alone one can attain dharma.' There was an incident in Vishvamitra's life when he was travelling through a drought-ridden countryside. He searched in vain for food but found nothing. Finally, he saw a pariah's house, which is forbidden, and begged for food. The pariah did not have anything but rotten meat, so he said that there was no food in his house. Vishvamitra then later stealthily broke into the pariah's house and found the rotten meat. He ate it to satisfy his hunger and thus to live.

Dip in the Manasarovar

Slowly and steadily I was nearing the holy Manasarovar. As evening approached I



A view of the Holy Kailash

fortunately found a tent to spend the night. There were one or two Indians in the tent; perhaps they were pilgrims. They too wanted to bathe in the holy waters and proceed to Kailash.

The following morning, after our ablutions and breakfast, we moved towards the lake. The huge lake was located on the vast Tibetan Plateau with the Himalayan ranges on the southern horizon. Soon we arrived at the banks of the Manasarovar. The sun was very bright which made the weather warm. The water was crystal clear.

Not only did I take a holy dip but I swam as well. There were two or three big fish, three or four feet long, circling around me in a very friendly way as I swam. Perhaps they were accustomed to do so with other pilgrims as well in this clear warm water. We saw thousands of water-birds of varying colours and sizes flying around and diving into the lake to catch fish! Of course in winter this huge lake will be frozen, the birds will be gone, and the fish survive beneath a thick layer of ice.

The holy bath and swim in the hot sun made me feel very fresh. I continued walking towards Kailash.

Towards Kailash and Jyoti Darshan

I moved towards my destination under a beautiful golden sun. The rays over Mount Kailash had turned the mountain into a huge mass of reddish gold. As the sun rose higher, the colours kept changing—first golden, then being yellowish, and lastly silvery. The whole scene was very enchanting and very difficult to describe in words. It is still shining in my mind, whenever I happen to think about that wonderously enchanting divine darshan. Of the whole *yatra*, those few hours of holiness—from about 5-10 am—on a clear bright sky, the

jyoti, light darshan of reddish, yellowish, and silvery white was the highest fulfilment of my *yatra*. I was still and enraptured. There was no mountain, only the Divine *jyoti* mingling with universal space. '*Antar-jyoti, bahir-jyoti, pratyag-jyoti paratparah, jyotir jyotihi svayam jyothi, atmajyoti, Shivo'smi aham*; light inside, light outside, light at the core within that is higher than the highest, light of all lights, the light that is self-luminous, the light of the Atman, I am that Shiva.'

Tibetans are also devoted to Kailash. Intermittently, some of them do *shastang* or *dandavat* full prostrations, to the Mount, while circumambulating the holy place.

First Day at Mount Kailash

On the first day I ventured out to do *pradakshina*, circumambulate, Kailash, when a heavy downpour began. Freezing water coming from the northern ice-capped mountains of Tibet covered the *pradakshina* path, and a cold biting wind began to blow. It was around 5 pm when dark rain-bearing clouds were hovering above and the water level on the path increased to waist deep flowing at great speed, making it impossible to proceed further. There was a hailstorm as well, with big hailstones falling on my umbrella. Due to the cold wind, water, and hail, I was nearly frozen. Only my chest felt warm. All the while I was chanting within, '*Om Namah Shivaya Sri Ma Ramakrishnaya Namah*'. Thinking that even if I have the final fall, before death, it should be with the holy mantra on my lips.

At this juncture, I saw a sadhu laden with some luggage which he could not manage to hold due to his tottering gait. I saw his belongings being swept away in the current. A little while later I did not see the sadhu either. The forceful current must have carried him away as an offering to Shiva. Often many

such untoward incidents have happened, for decades and centuries, causing death in this arduous pilgrimage. It was the sheer grace of God that I could face all those difficulties and still survive.

My feet became unsteady due to the force of the freezing water, strong winds, and weight of my meagre belongings. I was literally tottering and apprehensive of the end of my earthly life, amidst these holy surroundings. I kept chanting the mantra continuously, so that if my breath would stop, it would end with God's name on my lips. I slowly moved on with great difficulty as I had to find some shelter for the night.

I proceeded slowly. Around 6.30 pm there was a severe hailstorm. I thought my umbrella would be torn due to the hailstones of the size of *amlaka*, myrobalans, constantly falling from above. Fortunately, nothing of that sort happened. After about two hours of rain and hail the downpour slowed and then stopped.

Night in a Buddhist Monastery

Around 7 pm luckily, I found a Buddhist monastery on the way and entered with the hope of finding shelter and food for the night as it was becoming dark. In the dim light of the monastery I found my lower limbs had become white due to the constant walking in the freezing water for a couple of hours or more. The upper layer of my skin was white and deadened and by the next day it peeled off and was replaced by a new layer of skin. I had only a pair of canvas shoes.

The monastery was one big hall without separate rooms. There were small holes in the walls to help in ventilation. In the centre there was a fire burning continuously. A big kettle was mounted on a tripod stand in which salted jungle tea was constantly boiling for the

inmates as well as guests. The upper portion of the monastery was filled with black soot due to the constant burning of firewood. Often this black soot would turn into a sticky viscous gum like glob and fall on the blankets and clothes of the guests and inmates. The locals did not worry much about this. When one pulled at the glob from the clothes it would stick to one's fingers.

The Lamas were happy to see an Indian monk arriving at that odd hour and made me feel welcome and happy. Their evening prayers were going on with chanting accompanied by the sound of cymbals. I finished my supper by eating cottage cheese given by them and I also had *chhatu* powder with salt.

It was strange to see lads of five or ten years old and some older, admitted to the monastery. There were more young children than adults in monastic garbs. On enquiry it was revealed that in Tibetan society, there were more males than females. One or two older boys of the family get married and the younger ones go to a monastery, to live as monks. No doubt that was why because of the low number of females, the system of polyandry also existed in this society.

I was dead tired from walking the whole day, and for those two hours in that cold and rain. The monks provided me salted hot tea to warm myself. They later gave me cottage cheese and yak butter. After eating I lay down, covered myself with a blanket and slept like a log of wood. By the divine grace, this was the only shelter around Kailash. Had it not been for this I should have been walking around the sacred mountain throughout the night in wet clothes. I cannot imagine the consequences nor can you.

The Second Day at Kailash

I got up early in the morning feeling fully refreshed. Had hot salted tea, cottage cheese, and yak butter for breakfast and started walking under the bright sun around Kailash. By noon on the second day, I had covered about three-fourths of the distance of circumambulation.

I reached Gauri-Kund to the east of the mountain. I sprinkled a little holy water on my head as the Gauri-Kund was filled from the glacier water which melted into the Kund.

The Return Journey

On the way back to India, I was led forward by some Indian tradesmen. The Hoti pass, which is about 19,000 feet high, is the shortest and steepest way to cross over to India. One has to be a brave-heart to climb up the mountains for several kilometres. The tradesmen had other work to do so they left me at this point, advising me to keep climbing up and not stop even if I felt tired, for I may sleep off forever in that cold.

On top of the mountain, I saw huge vultures sitting there and looking at me. It seems that sometimes travellers, along with their animals, are trapped for hours together by sudden snowstorms. They often freeze and die and the vultures feed on their carcasses. I saw human hair and skeletons of large and small animals scattered around. By the grace of Sri Sri Guru Maharaj, there was a clear sky and

bright sunlight; I was able to cross over safely. Then I climbed down towards India.

I faced a test here. At some distance a Tibetan armed with a gun was waiting to rob Indian pilgrims of their valuables. Fortunately, I did not have anything worthwhile and I was in a monk's garb. Slowly proceeding with apprehension, I saw his tent house where a woman was serving tea. I drank hot tea and continued my journey towards India. I halted for the nights at *chattis*, located every ten to fifteen kilometres. These *chattis* were lice-infested and my clothes caught the lice too.

End of the Holy Yatra

Thus after a week or so I reached Badrinath. At Badrinath I had a hot bath in the *tapta-kunda*. Due to the cold I had not bathed for several weeks. The lice infestation in my clothes and body was removed by the hot bath. I washed my clothes and blankets too. I stayed at Badrinath for some more time doing tapasya in a *kutia* till October 1952. Winter was fast approaching and as proper shelter and food arrangements were not met, I decided to descend from the mountains. So I walked down all the way to Rishikesh and then to Haridwar to complete my pilgrimage.

I was later posted to the Mysore Study Circle for a year, and then, the next year, I had to go to our centre in Rangoon, Burma. □

(Concluded.)

An aerial view of the Mount Kailash—mark the natural Shivalinga formation of the place

