

# Sacred Mountains of the World

Edwin Bernbaum

The Mountain Institute

1998

Keyword: sacred mountains, spirituality, inspiration, philosophy, poetry.

## Introduction

As the highest and most dramatic features of the natural landscape, mountains have an extraordinary power to evoke the sacred. The ethereal rise of a ridge in mist, the glint of moonlight on an icy face, a flare of gold on a distant peak - such glimpses of transcendent beauty can reveal our world as a place of unimaginable mystery and splendor. In the fierce play of natural elements that swirl about their summits -thunder, lightning, wind, and clouds -mountains also embody powerful forces beyond our control, physical expressions of an awesome reality that can overwhelm us with feelings of wonder and fear.

People have traditionally revered mountains as places of sacred power and spiritual attainment. Sinai and Zion in the Middle East, Olympus in Greece, Kailas in Tibet, T'ai Shan in China, Fuji in Japan, the San Francisco Peaks in Arizona -all have acquired a special stature as natural objects of religious devotion. Speaking of the spiritual character of these mountains, of their ability to arouse spontaneous feelings of reverence and awe, Lama Anagarika Govinda, a Western practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism, wrote:

*The power of such a mountain is so great and yet so subtle that, without compulsion, people are drawn to it from near and far, as if by the force of some invisible magnet; and they will undergo untold hardships and privations in their inexplicable urge to approach and to worship the center of this sacred power. Nobody has conferred the title of sacredness on such a mountain, and yet everybody recognizes it; nobody has to defend its claim, because nobody doubts it; nobody has to organize its worship, because people are overwhelmed by the mere presence of such a mountain and cannot express their feelings other than by worship.<sup>1</sup>*

Throughout the world people of traditional religious cultures have looked up to mountains as symbols of their highest spiritual goals. Reflecting such a view of the heights, a ninth-century Japanese account describes the quest of a Buddhist monk named Shodo to climb Nantaizan, a sacred peak formerly known as Fudaraku:

*In this very same province is a mountain called Fudaraku, whose peaks soar into the Milky Way, whose snow-covered summit touches the emerald walls of the sky. Bearing in its bosom the roaring thunder which marks the passing hours, it is the abode of the Phoenix, twisted like the horn of a sheep. Rare is the presence of demons, and none the traces of human steps.... The Master of the Law [Shodo] ... urged his will onward ... .. If I do not reach the top of this mountain, I shall never be able to achieve Awakening!" After having uttered this vow, he moved across the flashing snows and walked over the young leaves shining like jewels; when he had gone half the way up, his body was exhausted, his strength left him. He rested for two days and finally came to see the summit: his ecstasy was like that in a dream, he felt a vertigo like that of Awakening.<sup>2</sup>*

For Shodo and others who followed him, the summit of the sacred mountain was a place to attain an inspiring glimpse of enlightenment, the ultimate goal of the Buddhist path.

Even today, in the secular, modern world, mountains are regarded as embodiments of humanity's highest ideals and aspirations. Expeditions to Mount Everest and other high peaks stand out as symbols of supreme efforts, of attempts by men and women to overcome their limitations and attain transcendent goals. Whether they realize it or not, many who hike and climb for sport and recreation are seeking an experience of spiritual awakening akin to that sought by people of traditional cultures. Maurice Herzog, the leader of the 1950 French expedition that made the first ascent of Annapurna-the first of the highest Himalayan peaks to be climbed -describes a dramatic example of such an experience as he approached the unclimbed summit:

*I felt as though I were plunging into something new and quite abnormal. I had the strangest and most vivid impressions, such as I had never before known in the mountains. There was something unnatural in the way I saw Lachenal [Herzog's companion] and everything around us. I smiled to myself at the paltriness of our efforts, for I could stand apart and watch myself making these efforts. But all sense of exertion was gone, as though there were no longer any gravity. This diaphanous landscape, this quintessence of Purity - these were not the mountains I knew: the), were the mountains of my dreams....*

*An astonishing happiness welled up in me, but I could not define it. Everything was so new, so utterly unprecedented. It was not in the least like anything I had known in the Alps, where one feels buoyed up by the presence of others - by people of whom one is vaguely aware, or even by the dwellings one can see in the far distance.*

*This was quite different. An enormous gulf was between me and the world. This was a different universe -withered, desert, lifeless; a fantastic universe*

*where the presence of man was not foreseen, perhaps not desired. We were braving an interdict, overstepping a boundary, and yet we had no fear as we continued upward. I thought of the famous ladder of St. Theresa of Avila. Something clutched at my heart.*<sup>3</sup>

These two accounts - traditional Eastern and modern Western -illustrate how people experience the sacred in mountains and in cultures around the world. In many of these experiences we find descriptions of an encounter with something totally apart from the world we know -what the German scholar of religions Rudolf Otto termed the "wholly other"-an inscrutable mystery that attracts and repels us with intense feelings of wonder and awe. This source of fascination and fear may appear divine or demonic, assuming the form of a god or the shape of a demon. Whether it reveals a vision of heaven or hell, the encounter with the sacred moves us to the depths of our being to disclose a realm of existence beyond the power of words to describe.<sup>4</sup>

Floating above the clouds, materializing out of the mist, mountains appear to belong to a world utterly different from the one we know, inspiring in us the experience of the sacred as the wholly other. Their dark forests, jagged cliffs, and twisted glaciers evoke impressions of a strange and alien universe. Their summits, barren and lifeless, often brilliant with snow, are harsh and forbidding places graced with incredible beauty, where only those with extraordinary powers or skills can survive. A description of the Alps at twilight by the Italian climber Guido Rey reveals the awesome impression that mountains can make as manifestations of the wholly other:

*... the peaks seemed to shine alone in the colorless vault, and to hang as if they did not touch the earth; they were like unreal shapes, created from nothing, like phantoms that live by night in the terrible heights of the sky and only appear now and then to sleepers in their dreams.*

*I did not recognize the beautiful forms I had seen by day; they had increased beyond measure, they had changed their appearance, they no longer belonged to our world; they were shadows of other unknown mountains cast by an unexplained phenomenon onto our sky by some distant star.*

*An irresistible shudder assailed us ...*<sup>5</sup>

Of all the features of the landscape, mountains most dramatically inspire a sense of awe in the presence of forces capable of annihilating us in an instant. Like the ark of the covenant and other sanctuaries of divinity, they must be approached with caution and respect. Those who are careless in the heights do not live long: a slight mistake, a disregard of the weather, and one can fall or freeze to death. Accordingly, people of traditional cultures have commonly regarded mountains as the dangerous haunts of gods and demons. A Chinese

poem composed in the fourth century B.C. conveys a vivid sense of the holy terror that the experience of mountain climbing can provoke:

*Climb higher and gaze into the distance,  
Your heart will be gripped with fear.  
Cirques of chasms surrounded by peaks,  
Frowning cliffs all around;  
Loose rocks that lean over the abyss,  
Escarpments that overhang each other*

*Clinging like a climbing bear,  
you remain frozen in place,  
Perspiration dripping down to your feet.  
You feel yourself lost, reeling,  
Transfixed with anguish, out of yourself;  
And your spirit, shaken loose,  
plunges into terrors without cause.<sup>6</sup>*

Mountains may so overwhelm us with their size and grandeur that we feel like insects crawling upon them. Gaston Rebuffat, one of Herzog's companions on Annapurna, wrote:

*And up on the mountain we began our ant-like labours. What is a man on an ice-world up in the sky? At that altitude he is no more than a will straining in a spent machine.<sup>7</sup>*

More casual travelers often remark on how insignificant they feel in the presence of high and impressive peaks. Mountains rise over the surrounding countryside in undisputed splendor, sovereigns of the valleys, plains, and lesser hills beneath them; they are commonly described as majestic and mighty. Unlike the reign of human kings, theirs seems eternal and incorruptible, like that of the highest gods, who sit enthroned upon their lofty summits.

The majestic power of the sacred is reflected in the forces that form the mountains themselves. Volcanoes, in particular, erupt with a fiery wrath that consumes everything in its path. We can do nothing to stop this energy -we can only get out of its way. The same holds true for the icy fury of an avalanche or a raging blizzard of snow. Such events are often interpreted by traditional peoples as expressions of divine displeasure. Even a person who does not believe in supernatural entities will be moved by the natural power of mountains-and pause a moment to wonder if he or she fully understands it.

The power of the sacred can take the form of all pervading love as well as all-consuming wrath. In fact, mystics often speak of their experience of divine love as a scorching heat they can hardly bear. A famous passage by the French philosopher Blaise Pascal describes such an experience:

*From about half past ten in the evening until about half past midnight-FIRE. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not the God of philosophers and scholars. Certitude. Certainty. Feeling. joy. Peace.*<sup>8</sup>

The sacred does not simply present itself to our gaze: it reaches out to seize us in its searing grasp.

Like the sight of a mountain peak breaking free from the earth to leap toward the open sky, the experience of the sacred can send our spirits soaring to sublime heights of bliss and rapture, uplifting us with visions of beauty and goodness beyond our wildest dreams. The sacred can also give us a sense of reassuring serenity and fulfillment. The fascination that it inspires leads to feelings of love and devotion so intense that we would give anything, even our lives, to remain in its presence. Mountains, in particular, have the power to arouse such feelings of overwhelming devotion.

Despite the hardship and fear encountered on the heights, people return again and again, seeking something they cannot put into words. Religious pilgrims are drawn to a power or presence they sense in a peak; tourists come to gaze on splendid views; trekkers return to wander in a realm set apart from the everyday world. The fascination of mountains casts a particular spell on mountaineers, who knowingly risk their lives for the sense of exultation they experience in ascending a high and dangerous mountain -or just being there on its heights. One well-known British mountaineer, Frank Smythe, reportedly languished and died of a broken heart when he was denied permission to climb Kangchenjunga, a Himalayan peak that he had set his mind on climbing.<sup>9</sup> Reflecting the sentiments of many of her fellow mountaineers, the Australian climber Freda Du Faur expressed the religious nature of the fascination mountains had for her:

*From the moment that my eyes rested on the snow-clad Alps [of New Zealand] I worshipped their beauty and was filled with a passionate yearning to touch these shining snows, to climb to their heights of silence and solitude, and feel myself one with the mighty forces around me.*<sup>10</sup>

Immersed in a landscape of infinite grandeur, we may find it easy to let go of our feelings of separateness and merge with the mountains around us or feel at home in their awesome presence. One evening at sunset, while climbing high in the Himalayas, I lingered outside my tent to watch the light fade off the surrounding peaks. Across a pool of dark clouds, the highest summits burned with a red glow that seemed to warm my body, as if I were standing before a fire. The light blazing on their snows gradually cooled to pink, then suddenly went out, and the peaks appeared to turn into gray mounds of ash. At that moment, just as I expected them to take on a cold, hostile cast, a lavender glow, shading to green near the horizon, rose in the sky to the north, over

Tibet, and I felt a friendly presence envelop me, as if the mountains themselves were extending me their welcome.

Not everyone experiences the sacred as the wholly other. Many find the sense of mystery it evokes right here in the midst of the world we think we know, even in what lies closest to us-ourselves. We live with ourselves every moment of our lives, but we scarcely know ourselves as we truly are. To know oneself, according to Hindu philosophy, is to attain the supreme realization of one's identity with the mysterious essence of the universe itself. To reduce the mystery of the sacred to the wholly other would condemn each person to remain forever alienated from his or her true self. Realizing their intimate relationship with God, Jewish mystics strive to sanctify each moment of their lives in order to become aware of a divine spark in all things and living creatures. The Navajo and the Hopi of the American Southwest revere every rock and feature of the landscape in which humans live.

The sacred is profoundly mysterious, not just as the wholly other but as an embodiment of the unknown itself. It is the aura of mystery, of something beyond our ken, that attracts us. We are drawn to the sacred precisely because it is unknowable -something that remains mysterious even when we are in its presence. We find this fascination reflected in the twinge of disappointment we feel when an unclimbed peak has been climbed. Something about the peak that gave it a special quality vanishes, and it becomes in some sense ordinary, like the rest of the world, no matter how distant or exotic it may be. There is a profound attraction in the very fact that a peak is unexplored or unclimbed. In a similar way, the sacred by its very nature eludes all our attempts to define and grasp it. Without some inner core of inscrutable mystery, it ceases to be sacred.

Mountains have a special power to evoke the sacred as the unknown. Their deep valleys and high peaks conceal what lies hidden within and beyond them, luring us to venture ever deeper into a realm of enticing mystery. Mountains seem to beckon to us, holding out the promise of something on the ineffable edge of awareness. There, just out of sight, over the next ridge, behind a summit, lies the secret, half forgotten essence of our childhood dreams. Rudyard Kipling captured this aspect of the mystery of mountains in these well-known lines:

*Something hidden. Go and find it.  
Go and look behind the Ranges  
Something lost behind the Ranges.  
Lost and waiting for you. Go!*<sup>11</sup>

That something lost behind the ranges may be a material treasure, some part of ourselves, or the highest spiritual truth - whatever holds the answer to our deepest longings.

The unknown also possesses a darker, more dangerous side; instead of our salvation, it may hold our damnation. The person who ventures into an unexplored range or tries to climb an unclimbed peak always harbors some fear that instead of what he seeks, he will find disaster and death. Even the hiker who goes into mountains that others know well may feel a trace of apprehension. What he finds there in the unknown may shatter his illusions and the comfortable world they uphold. Driven beyond the limits of physical endurance, he may discover things about himself -weaknesses and fears - that he would rather not know.

Although it may threaten everything we hold dear, the experience of the sacred opens up a new vision of reality that can free us from the stifling confines of the world to which we cling. We find this aspect of the sacred epitomized in the views that open around us as we climb to the top of a mountain. New and previously unknown vistas unfold around us as we emerge into the sun from the dark recesses of a narrow valley. The horizon recedes into the distance, revealing ridge after ridge of mountain ranges without end. As we gain a high promontory or a lofty summit, we may take a deep breath and feel as if we could take off and soar.

At a deeper level, the experience of the sacred as the unknown opens us to the ultimate mystery of reality itself. Just when we think we have grasped the nature of things as they are, some new aspect appears to confound our knowledge and understanding. As we climb a mountain, no matter how far our view may expand, something always lies hidden beyond the next horizon. In the encounter with the sacred, we suddenly intuit a reality that extends beyond the limits of what we know or can ever fathom.

The sacred is not merely the unknown, but the unknown that we regard as ultimately real. As the historian of religions Mircea Eliade has written, "the sacred is equivalent to a power, and, in the last analysis, to reality."<sup>12</sup> What we truly revere has a quality that sets it apart from everything else, making it seem as solid and real as a mountain made of granite. This quality of mountains contributes to the aura of sanctity that tends to settle upon their summits. The Bible describes them as the "eternal hills," implying that they have a more enduring reality than the plains around them. As the 175th Psalm declares:

*They that trust in the Lord  
Are as mount Zion, which cannot be moved,  
but abideth for ever.*<sup>13</sup>

As a manifestation of ultimate reality, the sacred is often distinguished from the profane, which appears, in comparison, fleeting and unreal. We may live most of our lives in the world of ordinary experience, but at moments, particularly when we are in the mountains, our usual preoccupations may seem inconsequential. The warm, rough touch of rock on fingers when climbing, the

quiet of twilight beneath high peaks, the cold and misery of being caught in a thunderstorm may strike us as more concretely real than the concerns and occupations of our everyday lives. Most of us at some point have shared the sentiments of the author of Ecclesiastes, who wrote, "I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind."<sup>14</sup> The Hindu Upanishads express a similar dissatisfaction with the world of profane existence:

*From the unreal lead me to the real.  
From darkness lead me to light.  
From death lead me to immortality.*<sup>15</sup>

Mountains can offer a vision of something pure and eternal, beyond the corruptions of time.

Just as traditional cultures frequently separate the sacred from the profane, so they cordon off certain mountains with rules and rituals. Only those of spiritual power and purity may venture up these mountains without fear of provoking the anger of the gods or the spite of demons. In North America, for example, many Native Americans believed that only people with the proper ritual preparation might climb to the summits of sacred peaks without being struck down by spirits. In the Bible only Moses is regarded as holy enough to step onto the hallowed ground of Mount Sinai and ascend the mountain to converse with God.

Nevertheless, the sacred may erupt without warning into the profane world of material existence. We may be walking along a trail when something -a stone or a tree -catches our attention. As we glance toward it, a translucent beauty beyond anything we have ever imagined shines through it, giving it a heightened reality, and we feel ourselves in the presence of the sacred. The paradigm of such an experience occurs in the Biblical episode of the burning bush, which takes place, significantly, on a mountain. There Moses beholds a bush that burns yet is not consumed, thereby revealing the presence of God. Likewise, our stone beside the trail takes on an unearthly glow yet remains for all that a stone, a part of this world. The place where someone has such an experience often becomes a pilgrimage shrine sacred to others. Because of their awe-inspiring power, mountains are prime places for this kind of encounter with the sacred. A beautiful example appears in Herzog's description of the striking change of perception he experienced near the summit of Annapurna:

*The snow, sprinkled over every rock and gleaming in the sun, was of a radiant beauty that touched me to the heart. I had never seen such complete transparency, and I was living in a world of crystal. Sounds were indistinct, the atmosphere like cotton Wool.*<sup>16</sup>

As an expression of ultimate power and reality, what we regard as sacred possesses ultimate value and meaning. It embodies whatever we cherish above everything else, whatever stirs our deepest feelings and awakens our highest aspirations. This will differ from person to person, from culture to culture: for a Christian it may be selfless love, for a Buddhist ultimate enlightenment, for a Taoist harmony with the underlying way of nature. Many regard the sacred as the sheer embodiment of the beautiful and the sublime. Whatever it may be, the ultimate value expressed in the sacred provides meaning, direction, and purpose in life. It gives us a sense of place and inspires our greatest efforts. Here lies one of the great attractions of mountain climbing: the ascent to the summit offers an inspiring model of a path leading to a lofty goal, a path such as we would wish to follow through the confusing maze of everyday life.

Because of their power to awaken an overwhelming sense of the sacred, mountains embody and reflect the highest and most central values of religions and cultures throughout the world. Mount Sinai occupies a special place as the awesome site where God appeared in cloud and thunder to give Moses the Torah, the law and teachings that form the core of the Jewish religion. The graceful cone of Mount Fuji represents for many a sublime symbol of the beauty and spirit of the Japanese nation. The remote peak of Mount Kailas, rising aloof above the Tibetan Plateau, directs the hearts and minds of millions in India and Tibet toward the realm of the highest gods and the utmost attainments of spiritual meditation. The Hopi and Navajo view the San Francisco Peaks of Arizona as a divine source of water on which their lives and communities depend. For many in the modern world, Mount Everest symbolizes the highest goal they may strive to attain, whether their pursuit be material or spiritual.

Like the sacred values they express, the mountains revered by cultures around the world appear infinite in number and kind. They range from the highest peaks on earth to hills that barely rise above the surrounding landscape. They are regarded traditionally as places of revelation, centers of the universe, sources of life, pathways to heaven, abodes of the dead, temples of the gods, expressions of ultimate reality in its myriad manifestations. The following chapters explore the diverse ways in which people have experienced the sacred on the high and lonely reaches of our planet.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds* (Berkeley: Shambhala, 1970), 197.

<sup>2</sup> Kukai, "Stone Inscription for the Sramana Shodo Who Crossed Mountains and Streams in His Search for Awakening," trans. Allan Grapard, in *The Mountain Spirit*, ed. Michael Charles Tobias and Harold Drasdo (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, '979), 55.

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Herzog, *Annapurna*, trans. Nea Morin and Janet Adam Smith (New York: Dutton, 1952), 206-7. Saint Theresa of Avila was a famous sixteenth-century Spanish mystic who wrote extensively about the spiritual path leading to union with God.

<sup>4</sup> See Rudolf Otto's classic and influential work *The Idea of the Holy* (*Das Heilige*), trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1950).

<sup>5</sup> Guido Rey, *Peaks and Precipices: Scrambles in the Dolomites and Savoy*, trans. J. E. C. Eaton (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1914), 187-88.

<sup>6</sup> From "A Poetic Description of the High Tower," attributed to Sung Yü. For a French translation see Paul Demiéville, "La montagne dans l'art littéraire chinois," *France-Asie* (1965):13.

<sup>7</sup> Gaston R6buffat, *Mont Blanc to Everest*, trans. Geoffrey Sutton (London: Thames and Hudson, 1956), 83.

<sup>8</sup> From Pascal's famous Memorial describing his experience on the night of November 23, 1654- It was found after his death, scribbled on a piece of paper stitched into the lining of his coat.

<sup>9</sup> Herbert Tichy heard the story about Smythe from a nurse who treated him. See *Himalaya*, trans. R. Rickett and D. Streatfeild (New York: Putnam's, 1970), 118.

<sup>10</sup> Freda Du Faur, *The Conquest of Mount Cook and Other Climbs: An Account of Four Seasons' Mountaineering on the Southern Alps of New Zealand* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1915), 27.

<sup>11</sup> Rudyard Kipling, "The Explorer."

<sup>12</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959),

<sup>13</sup> Ps- 125:1

<sup>14</sup> Eccles. 1:14.

<sup>15</sup> Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 1-3.28, translated in Robert Ernest Hume, trans., *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, 2d rev. ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1931), 80.

<sup>16</sup> Herzog, *Annapurna*, 207- On manifestations of the sacred in the profane world, see Eliade, *The Sacred and Profane*, 11-12. For overviews of various

approaches to the study of the sacred and sacred places, see Carsten Colpe, "The Sacred and the Pro-fane," trans. Russell M. Stockman, in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 17: 511-26, and Joel P. Brereton, "Sacred Space," in *Ibid*, PP- 526-35.

---

### Notes to readers

The Mountain Forum would like to sincerely thank our member Edwin Bernbaum and the University of California Press for permission to include the introduction to the book "Sacred Mountains of the World" on the Mountain Forum Online Library.

In his award-winning collection of luminous photographs, *Sacred Mountains of the World*, Bernbaum takes you through the sacred ranges of six continents, while weaving the stories of gods and spirits with those of explorers and mountaineers. The best, most substantive, book of its kind. - -Brian Bruya. Read more. From the Inside Flap. "This book is fascinating . . . full of adventure, cultural significance and religious symbology." "Sir Edmund Hillary." "Once in a great and precious while, a book comes across a columnist's desk that arrests the spirit and causes one to see the world in a breathtakingly new way. [This] is such a book." "Georgie Ann Geyer, Universal Press Syndicate. Read more. Mount Parnassus This mountain of limestone in central Greece towers above Delphi, north of the Gulf of Corinth, and offers stunning views of the surrounding olive groves. According to Greek mythology, this mountain was sacred to Dionysus and the Dionysian mysteries; it was also sacred to Apollo and the Corycian nymphs, and it was the home of the Muses. Mount Pelion Located at the southeastern part of Thessaly in central Greece, it forms a hook-like peninsula between the Pagasetic Gulf and the Aegean Sea. In Greek mythology, Mount Pelion was the homeland of Chiron the Centaur, tutor of many anc