

Changing Values

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'It's not the summit that is important but the act of getting to the summit.' So wrote Eric Shipton in the thirties. Shipton disliked the large scale expeditions designed to 'conquer' the mountain at all costs. By the fifties a military logistical pyramid had been perfected to climb the 8000m peaks. This method involved large numbers of climbers, even larger numbers of sherpas and large scale expenditure. The 1953 British Everest expedition was organized along these lines. The expedition was successful and thus it became a model for future trips.

Few people paused to question the worth of these large scale projects with one remarkable exception: Diemberger, Buhl, Schmuck and Wintersteller made the first ascent of Broad Peak (8047m) as a lightweight party in 1957. By the end of the fifties all the 8000m peaks had been climbed. (With the exception of Xixabangma, out of bounds to westerners and climbed by the Chinese in 1964.) At the end of the sixties most of the major 7000ers had been climbed. What to do next? Even bigger trips to climb technical routes on the highest mountains, or alpine style trips to the lower peaks of the Himalaya? Amazingly, most climbers at the beginning of the seventies regarded alpine style ascents of high peaks as a remote possibility.

If you wish to know exactly what alpine style climbing is, imagine that instead of being in a Himalayan base camp you are on a campsite in Chamonix. To reach Chamonix you would have travelled by car or train but to reach the Himalayan base camp you would have walked for perhaps two weeks using porters to help carry your food and equipment. Porters at this stage are of course essential as it is not possible for an individual himself to carry the two months' food he may need for the duration of the trip. Say you decide to climb the Walker Spur then with one or two friends you will set out from Chamonix with a few days' food and a selection of climbing gear. Next morning you will reach the foot of the route and the next day or two will be spent climbing to the summit and then descending the other side, eventually returning to the campsite in Chamonix. There would have been no prior preparation of the route unless you had made a previous attempt which had been foiled perhaps by bad weather. In this case the only preparation would have been a mental one, as no equipment would have been left behind from the earlier attempt.

For an alpine style ascent in the Himalaya you do essentially the same, although some practical modifications sometimes need to be added to the simple formula. The face to be climbed may be preceded by a long glacier and it may be advisable to carry a couple of loads each to a tent under the face itself. This is one example, but I will consider this question in more depth later.

The big fixed-rope expedition tactics have been exported worldwide from the Himalaya. Even the Alps, contrary to all established traditions, have seen the introduction of fixed ropes. The competition to make new winter climbs has led

to such routes as the Eiger Direct and the Whymper Spur Direct being climbed by siege tactics. The climbers involved in these ascents are often the leading climbers of the day and thus consider themselves immune from the traditions operating at the time. They argue that no one else was capable of doing the route anyway. Why do they not leave these climbs alone until someone is capable of climbing them properly? Fortunately there are many fine examples of winter alpine ascents and now the fixed rope brigade have either ceased their activities or moved elsewhere with them.

In Peru and Bolivia most of the mountains of interest to climbers are around 6000m in height and are thus comparable to the minor peaks in the Himalaya. Although in the thirties Erwin Schneider and his companions made many first ascents in Peru without the use of fixed ropes or support teams, by the fifties we saw the widespread use of Himalayan tactics there. Leigh Ortenberger and his American friends were the first to employ alpine tactics to climb the more difficult faces in Peru. Their lead has been followed, particularly by French and English climbers in the seventies. Already the bulk of new routes are now achieved in alpine style and it is safe to say that big expedition climbing will soon die a natural death in the Andes.

In Patagonia the ferocious weather and the long very technical climbs have meant that the use of fixed ropes has become a tradition. The first major alpine climb was the supercouloir on Fitzroy, climbed in a single push by José Fonrouge, an Argentinian climber, but now even Cerro Torre has been climbed like this. I do not think that fixed ropes will die out as quickly here as in Peru, partly because of the extreme discomfort involved in spending a prolonged period on a big wall climb battered by appalling weather.

In Alaska all the best North American climbers have rejected fixed ropes and the only big expeditions are made up of Europeans whose achievements are not very significant. The Californian school of alpinism as envisaged, and to a certain extent practised, by Chouinard and his friends is now having an impact on the big walls in Alaska and, to a much lesser extent, in Patagonia and the Himalaya.

The British expedition to the S face of Annapurna and the simultaneous French expedition to the W pillar of Makalu in 1971 were heralded as ushering in a new era of Himalayan mountaineering. Certainly these two weighty expeditions completed technical climbs of a far higher standard than had been previously achieved at altitude. They really proved that anything was possible if everything was allowed. These expeditions were a step forward because they managed very hard climbs without using more climbers or equipment than on expeditions to climb the easiest routes up the 8000m peaks.

The precedent set by these two ascents has been continued by climbers of all nations but at the same time a new exciting phase of Himalayan alpinism has been gaining in importance during the seventies. Messner and Habeler's two day ascent of Hidden Peak astounded the pundits — the first eight-thousander to be climbed in true alpine style. Now several major Himalayan peaks have been climbed this way and within the next few years all the rest will be. Simultaneously with these developments on the highest peaks, very high alpine climbing standards have been brought to bear on impressive walls at lower altitudes, but it is still a minority of expeditions that dispense with fixed ropes. That minority is increasing as people learn by example just what is possible.

There are many reasons to prefer small expeditions to large ones. One of the most tangible from a climber's point of view concerns equipment. Big trips leave masses of fixed rope and other equipment in place on the mountain, which on many climbs lasts for a considerable time before disappearing. In 1978 on Jannu we encountered traces of rope, low down, that definitely dated from the French ascent in 1962. They did not of course affect our climb in any way but what if you arrived only the season after a climb had been made with fixed ropes? Even on a snow and ice route a lot of rope may remain and certainly on a rock climb there may even be enough gear left to just jumar straight up the route. This problem could be solved by the expedition members stripping the mountain after their ascent, but in practice that very rarely happens.

The debris on the mountain is just part of the dramatic effect on the environment produced by a big expedition. The ecological impact of a thousand porters walking over and living on a fragile alpine meadow is obvious. The relatively vast influx of money and goods into the region completely changes the lifestyle of the locals which may not necessarily be a bad thing, but the real point is that the locals have no choice in the matter. Big expeditions tend to have disproportionately more gear than small expeditions and hence more porters per climber.

Most big trips, in Nepal at least, employ sherpas above base camp for load carrying and sometimes lead climbing. The continual ferrying of loads traversing the same dangerous terrain over and over again is usually the most likely way of getting the chop, and the sherpas invariably bear the brunt of this danger. The Khumbu ice-fall to reach the Western Cwm of Everest is a classic example. To climb Nuptse we each went twice each way through the ice-fall and carried all the gear we needed without external assistance. On a big trip for each member high on the mountain perhaps ten trips each way through the ice-fall would be necessary. Most of these trips would probably be made by sherpas and as the Khumbu ice-fall is an extremely dangerous spot the sherpas are actually exposed to far more danger on the expedition than the climbers themselves. The majority of the people killed in this ice-fall are sherpas who are being paid to carry so that the sahibs will have a better chance of climbing the mountain.

Think of the expedition members who do not make it to the top even though some of their companions have done so and they themselves are quite capable of doing so. It is pretty nice getting to the top and important too. At least on an alpine style attempt everyone capable of making the summit stands an equal chance of getting there. They will have also done a lot of lead climbing instead of just a short section of leading and days of jumaring up fixed ropes. On some trips consisting of superstars plus various lackeys there are climbers who work every day knowing that they will never be given a shot at the summit. By its very nature everyone must contribute equally on an alpine style push, so the idea of a leader is rather absurd, except to satisfy the demands of bureaucracy.

The big expeditions are buying the impossible of today instead of leaving it to future generations. The large cost cannot be borne on a personal level so extensive publicity campaigns must be launched to ensure sufficient coverage for the sponsors. This can be reasonable enough if there is a genuine public interest in the project but the real difficulty occurs when the team fails. The team members

are doomed to writing a story out of what might have been a non-event and we, the public, are doomed to read about it. When the British K2 expedition was terminated because of Nick Estcourt's death I am sure the team members did not want to go out and write about and talk about K2, but they needed to do so because of the cost of the trip and the commercial involvement. This team was a fairly light one as K2 trips go, but the Karakorum happens to be an expensive place to visit. It is difficult to mount even the smallest trip there purely from one's own pocket.

It might be thought that alpine pushes are far more dangerous than fixed rope expeditions but statistics certainly disprove this at the moment, though the situation may well change. The repeated crossing of the same dangerous terrain I have mentioned earlier, but the other main cause of accidents is relatively incompetent people getting very high on the mountain, even to the summit. These people in many cases could never have got there under their own steam. A lot of accidents said to be purely bad luck are more in fact a case of this, allied with poor judgement or overriding ambition. On an alpine push climbers unsuited to the project will never get high enough to get themselves into a serious situation. Nonetheless an ascent of a high Himalayan peak is always a fairly dangerous business no matter what style is chosen. In the future we are bound to see a competent alpine style party stuck somewhere above 8000m because of bad weather. Its chances of survival for more than a few days will be slim.

In 1979 just before we arrived to climb Nuptse there was a German party doing the South Col route according to the well tested formula. There were 8 climbers and 22 sherpas and amongst them were some very experienced people. Most of the expedition reached the summit without undue difficulty. The last party to go for the summit consisted of Ray Genet from Alaska and the leader's wife Mrs. Schartz both accompanied by competent sherpas. They all reached the summit but on the descent a decision was made to bivouac. The sherpas both thought that this was inadvisable and one of them carried on down to the camp at the South Col. The other sherpa remained to bivouac because he felt obliged to stay. By the morning Ray had died and shortly after Mrs. Schartz died of exhaustion while trying to descend. The sherpa survived though he suffered severe frostbite. I do not think that these two climbers would have got into such a serious position if there had not been a line of fixed ropes to the South Col and sherpas to assist with the carrying of equipment.

It is no use being completely dogmatic about the best way to tackle a mountain: different problems require different techniques to solve them. Often a pure alpine style ascent is neither a suitable nor a desirable method of climbing a particular mountain, but with suitable minor modifications the techniques can be widely applied. Take the South Col route on Everest as an example. It would be feasible to climb from base camp to the summit in four days without any prior preparation of the route. The problem in this case would be to get sufficiently acclimatized to be able to make such a rapid ascent. A better way might be to make a couple of carries each into the Western Cwm with say four climbers. After four or five days in the Cwm the climbers could nip up to the South Col and then descend again after which they would be in a position to climb to the summit in say three days from the Cwm. This seems to me to be the most practical approach.

If I wished to attempt a difficult route on a high Himalayan peak, then I would try to get permission to do the easy route on the same mountain beforehand so as to get acclimatized and also to become familiar with the descent route. Alternatively I would try for permission on some lower peak in the same region. Otherwise one is left with little choice other than to use the primary objective for acclimatization by climbing the lower sections several times, thus spoiling the chance of doing an alpine style ascent.

In the future I think we will see a general trend towards lighter expeditions; some will be in pure alpine style, but many will involve practical compromises perhaps using 300m of fixed rope. The Anglo-French party on Kangchenjunga in 1979 provide a perfect example. Their trip was easily the lightest to climb a major new route on such a high peak. They used fixed ropes for the first very technical section but then climbed in a push from there. The route was not really a practical proposition in pure alpine style. How would it be possible to become acclimatized when nothing else in the immediate region is permitted by the Nepalese authorities? The same problems of acclimatization become far less acute when the peak is below 7500m. On a very hard technical climb, where progress is slow, it is even possible to get acclimatized while climbing the route itself. Thus we can expect to see many peaks below 7500m being treated exactly as in the Alps with very hard climbs being done in a single push.

