
ANDY PARKIN

Solo Khumbu Solo, Part II

Following my Dawa Peak trip of 2007/2008 I decided to return to Nepal and the Khumbu region 12 months later. I thought I understood a little bit more about Himalayan winter soloing and wanted to carry on the idea of ever harder and technical climbing in austere surroundings. Of course the Khumbu area is not that wild; good paths, villages and lodges take the



30. Watercolour painted by Andy Parkin at 4000m looking up the Omega valley, Kangtega on right. Parkin attempted the unnamed central flat-topped summit (6080m) via its central couloir and system of gullies.

sting out of the winter experience, but once on the mountain and alone it becomes something like the real thing. This time, thanks to the previous expedition, I at least had an idea of what I could climb. Familiarity lends an air of intimacy to an area, the imagination can run free and new routes appear everywhere. I had found my alternative winter playground and it was exciting.

After the chaos of Kathmandu with its power cuts (18 hours a day without electricity), arriving in Lukla was literally a breath of fresh air and once having engaged Pemba as porter we set off towards his village, en route for Phakding. At Pemba's home we had tea and I met his wife, all smiles now but just six months earlier she had lost their first child. A few days later she walked up to Khumjung to visit the clinic for a check up (a two or three day walk for a western trekker). Pemba had once been a novice monk, studying then leaving the order to marry and work as either porter or guide, and of course farming their land.

One cold and very frosty morning we walked into Pangboche, the village

at the foot of Ama Dablam. The rising sun thawed out the terrace of the Everest View Lodge. It was perfect; around us peaks towered in every direction, Kangtega to the south of Ama Dablam while to the north Nuptse's broad face shone in the sun. I decided that this would do as my base and whilst eating negotiated cheaper rates as I planned to live here for a few weeks. Pemba left for Namche Bazar and I went up and over the Imja Khola river to contour round and explore the alpages above its southerly bank. There I discovered the abandoned settlement of Omega and at the head of the valley a northern facet of Kangtega with other summits running north-east, tantalising stark north faces, all unclimbed. This was it – nirvana! It was a horribly cold and dark place (to be visited sparingly) so I spent time above the clouds in the sun at the base camp of Ama Dablam, a lovely place to acclimatise and paint. When food or paper ran low I moved back to Pangboche and the warmth of the lodge, sometimes teaching painting to the children there. Kharsang, a boy 10 years old, was good and I think he must still have his paintings hung on the walls.

Finally it was time to get on with the main business – that is of climbing – so I began carrying up to the base of the peak that dominated the head of the Omega valley, a flat-topped mountain with no name but on one map it's given a height of 6080m. Its glowering north face is cut by a gully that promised some hard climbing. Being now January the sun shone a tiny bit more into the head of the valley; in fact it had melted the small amount of snow there leaving nothing to use for water. At 4700m I pitched my tent and set about scraping frost off the moss so I could make a drink. Next morning I carried the hardware up to the foot of the snow couloir, the initial part of my proposed route, and brought down about 20kg of ice to melt.

After a few nights spent at 4700m and a brief rest in the village I was ready to go up again to begin the climb. It began as a classic couloir of good snow leading to a small flat col. Though the first night I spent here was comfortable, I didn't sleep. High up on the summit crest the wind howled, sending down spindrift and, worse, blocks of ice. A mind too alert and constantly revising the possibilities kept me awake 'till dawn. Up I went all the same – 'just to have a look', I kept repeating. Snow turned to névé and the névé turned to ice; things became precarious and the first crux of the day had me shedding the sack to climb a near-vertical corner with dabs of névé stuck on rock then dry tooling to finish. Up with the sack and on with climbing that took on an ever more serious feel as the gully steepened. An awesome wall of delicate ice had me hanging the bag on a sling again. 'This is real climbing,' I shouted in my head, not daring to say it aloud. I didn't want to break the silence. Of course the sack stuck fast so I went down to free it, prusiking back up on my 'oh so thin' Dyneema ropes. Once back at the belay I could take in the next section ... and it was horrible. Protecting myself with gear placed in the poor cracks, I had just enough confidence to force the exit onto the icefield above. As I did so it went dark, leaving me pinned to the hard black ice with nowhere to go and surrounded by sheer

walls. I cast out to my right and in the beam of my headlamp there beckoned a small ledge with a bit of a roof to give shelter.

Tense seconds of a daring traverse landed me on the ledge but what a let-down it was, miniscule, sloping and with an enormous drop to one side. Nor was it that safe from anything dropping out of the sky. It was going to have to do though. Squirming into my sleeping bag, thrust into the rucksack as a sort of half hammock, was diabolically hard work. This done, I put the rope round my torso to hold me in position, glad of the down suit now as I couldn't properly get into the bag. I managed to brew up and eat as swirls of snow poured from above. All night lumps of ice came down, scattering fragments like shrapnel, some hitting me. Needless to say, sleep was impossible. It was a truly awful night. First light found me groggy and bad-tempered for I knew it was a no-goer. With the light came the realisation of where I had put myself. Above, a steep dark wall had a smear of ice that looked as if it would shatter under the first blow of an axe; the surrounding walls overhung. Out to the right lay my imagined escape route. Through binoculars a zigzag line had suggested itself, avoiding the worst. Now, close up, it looked suicidal. 'Forget that,' I thought. I turned my eyes to a vague line above. 'Even well belayed it would be hard to do,' I ruminated over a hot drink as a volley of ice blocks whirled past into the void. Four hundred or so metres above beckoned the wind-blasted summit, and potentially harder ground too. I had pulled the trigger too many times already. Dare I do it again? It was starting to look a bit sick and maybe there's more to life than roulette. What about some fun for a change?

The die was cast. Abseiling towards salvation I tried not to think of failure but reasoned that instinct had saved me again. Ice threads, nuts and pitons were all sacrificed as gravity drew me down and out of that now dismal place that just a few days earlier had been the focus of all my desires. Now I couldn't wait to get out of there. I staggered down the final snow slope and the hideous moraine before, just on nightfall, the tent appeared out of the gloom and drink, food and rest rounded out the day's experience. Next day I walked out to the village. Bent under a gigantic load, I meandered along the lower valley coming across snow leopard tracks and then a man! There he was, a bearded and bedraggled figure standing next to a small tent. His name was Dave; offering me a warm drink we talked a while. He was waiting for his two friends, out climbing on the icefalls that hung down the shaded walls of this now seemingly crowded valley. Talk of a coincidence! The local climbing Sherpas had told me there had never been an expedition into here before. I carried on down to where comforts of village life awaited me, resting the next day and fixing up a porter to help me back down to Lukla. Lachpa turned out to be a smiling rogue who liked his beer, but then again so do I and as we lost height the taste buds became active once again.

Back in Kathmandu a few days of easy living had me ready for the next phase of the journey. I had in mind to go to Barabise, a small town some 100km east of the capital on the highway to Tibet where Community

Action Nepal, the charity set up by Doug Scott, has established a school for deaf children. I wanted to teach an art programme there – an idea I had discussed with Ian Wall, CAN's representative in Nepal. Thanks to Ian I met up with the CAN's Nepalese staff and all agreed the project would be worth a go so one morning off we drove. I immediately recognised Barabise as a place we pass through when returning from Tibet, usually in the dark and with our minds set on the fleshpots of Kathmandu. Spanning the river at the north end of the town, a typical Himalayan footbridge gave access to terraces for the rice paddies. At their foot lay the CAN school in an idyllic setting, a true haven of peace after the bustle of the city.

I speak some words of Nepali and of course many people speak English. But neither language would suffice here where all of the 50 or so pupils are deaf. I could, however, communicate with images, as so many times before whilst travelling. I taught painting to 22 of the children, hoping they all would profit from my 'on sight' techniques, in the sense that eventually they could earn a living when out on the streets. In Nepal so many things are hand-painted, everything from rickshaws, trucks and buses to cinema signs, and of course there's also the selling of paintings to tourists. If it isn't practical it won't work in Nepal. Painting cannot be regarded as a luxury when daily living is about survival.

In all this I was counting heavily on the fact that Nepalis can be amazingly talented. This proved to be true; as the weeks went by we did good work together and I took them out of the classroom to paint the bamboo and banana trees. The children were so keen and quick to seize my ideas; I think at least six of them could become artists. I certainly hope so as my stay at Barabise took more out of me than had the climbing! Some evenings, after eating the eternal dal bhat, I would feel so drained of energy it was as if the classroom were a stage demanding constant attention. I'm not sure I could do it all the time but I am definitely returning to follow up all we have begun. I got a lot out of it, and, as Doug says, it's good to put something back in. It was about time I did just that, and at the end of the day if it is all about Karma then perhaps the gods will continue to smile down on me as I climb.



31. Banana tree at Barabise, Nepal, February 2008. Parkin painted these with the children of the CAN school for the deaf outside the classroom.