

[Mountains of Mystery](#)

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INSIGHT

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The Earth's most dramatic features, mountains are to Hindus the abode of Gods, the haunt of holy sages and the supreme pilgrimage destination

Viewed through the eyes of a Buddhist or Hindu, mountains are mystical realms of Gods, heavens, spirits and spiritual masters. In *Sacred Mountains of the World*, a remarkable book by Edwin Bernbaum (University of California Press, 1997), the perspectives of mountains and lore from disparate cultures of the world are explored. Focusing solely on the prominent peaks of the Himalayas,

the following article is excerpted from Bernbaum's work.

By Edwin Bernbaum, Berkeley

An enormous range 1,500 miles long, the Himalayas rise in the monsoon-drenched jungles north of Burma to sweep in a great arc of snow and ice northwest along the borders of India and Tibet, through Bhutan, Sikkim and Nepal, up to the dusty glaciers of the Karakoram on the remote desert frontier between Pakistan and China. As the loftiest mountains on Earth, the Himalayas have come to embody the highest ideals and aspirations. The sight of their sublime peaks, soaring high

and clean above the dusty, congested plains of India, has for centuries inspired visions of transcendent splendor and spiritual liberation. Invoking such visions, the Puranas, ancient works of Hindu mythology, have this to say of Himachal, or the Himalayas: In the space of a hundred ages of the Gods, I could not describe to you the glories of Himachal; that Himachal where Siva dwells and where the Ganges falls like the tendril of a lotus from the foot of Vishnu. There are no other mountains like Himachal, for there are found Mount Kailas and Lake Manasarovar. As the dew is dried up by the morning sun, so are the sins of mankind by the sight of Himachal.

Millions of years ago the summit of Mount Everest, today the world's highest mountain, lay beneath the Tethys, an ancient sea separating Asia from the Indian subcontinent. Through the gradual movement of the Earth's tectonic plates--still ongoing today--the two great land masses collided to fold and thrust up the peaks of the Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau. Fossils formed in sedimentary rocks near the tops of the highest mountains attest to the submarine origins of the range. The fracturing of the Earth's crust also led to injections of magma, forming here and there, as a result of glacial action, magnificent walls and peaks of granite, but no volcanoes. The youngest mountains on Earth, the Himalayas have risen so recently within the last few million years that the watershed lies a hundred miles north of their crest. As a consequence, preexisting rivers have cut through the range, creating the deepest valleys in the world, such as the Kali Gandaki Valley between Annapurna and Dhaulagiri in central Nepal, nearly four miles deep.

The Himalayas are sacred for followers of five Asian

religions--Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and the indigenous Bon tradition of Tibet. These religions revere the mountains as places of power where many of their most important sages and teachers have attained the heights of spiritual realization. According to Jain mythology, Rishabhanatha, the first of twenty-four saviors of this age, achieved enlightenment on Mount Kailas, the most sacred peak in the Himalayan region. There, in the vicinity of the same mountain, Shenrab, the legendary founder of Bon, is said to have taught and meditated. Sikhs, followers of an Indian religion that developed from the interaction of Islam and Hinduism in the fifteenth century ce, revere Hemkund, a mountain lake near the source of the Ganges, as the place where Guru Gobind Singh, the last of their ten principal teachers, practiced meditation in a previous life. The Himalayas abound with caves and shrines where Buddhist sages, such as the Tibetan yogi Milarepa, have meditated and attained enlightenment.

Hindus, by far the largest group in India with more than 800 million adherents, regard the entire range as the God Himalaya, father of Parvati, the wife of Siva. King of the mountains, Himalaya lives high on a peak with his queen, the Goddess Mena, in a palace ablaze with gold, attended by divine guardians, maidens, scent-eating creatures and other magical beings. His name, composed of the words hima and alaya, means in the Sanskrit language of ancient India the "abode of snow." As a reservoir of frozen water, the body and home of the God Himalaya is the divine source of sacred rivers, such as the Ganges and Indus, that sustain life on the hot and dusty plains of northern India. The ancient poets and sages regarded the range as more than a realm of snow; they saw it as an earthly paradise sparkling with streams and

forests set beneath beautiful peaks. Above and beyond the earthly paradise of the Himalayas lie the heights of heaven.

Everest and Khumbila: The Himalayas hold hundreds of sacred mountains. The highest peak, and the one that for the West represents the range as a whole, is Mount Everest. As the loftiest point on Earth, rising to 29,028 feet above sea level, it has acquired a semisacred status in the eyes of the modern world. At over 17,000 feet, the foot of Everest stands higher than the highest summit of the Alps. The mountain itself lies in the eastern Himalayas, nearly hidden behind a screen of lesser peaks lining the border between Nepal and Tibet. Only from the north, from the valley of Rongbuk in Tibet, does Everest reveal itself in solitary splendor as an unmatched pyramid of rock and ice. Great ridges of snow sweep smoothly up to converge in a graceful tip that in the last glow of twilight seems to hover among the stars. From the windswept ruins of Rongbuk Monastery, perhaps the highest monastery in the world, Everest appears framed between rocky walls that guide the eye straight to the mountain itself (photo left). No other snow peaks soar up to distract the mind from its contemplation of the highest point on Earth.

Everest has come to be associated in the West with the pinnacle of achievement, and those who have climbed it are set apart in the eyes of the world. Except for the Sherpas who lived near Everest's foot, the people of Nepal took little notice of the mountain until they learned from the British of its status as the highest peak on Earth. In response to outside interest, government officials formulated a modern name, Sagarmatha, that designates today not only Everest, but the national park created around it and the province in which it is found. In

Nepali, sagarmatha means literally the "One Whose Forehead Reaches Up to the Sky," indicating its unmatched height. The word, unusual in Nepali, brings to mind a term in the sacred language of Sanskrit--sagaramanthana or sagaramatha, meaning the "churning of the ocean." This secondary Sanskrit association would equate Everest with the cosmic mountain of creation.

The Sherpas themselves have traditionally paid much more attention to Khumbila, a jagged rock peak 19,294 feet high, nearly 10,000 feet lower than Everest. Khumbila stands right at the center of the Sherpa valleys of Khumbu. Because of its central location, the mountain is regarded by the people who dwell there as the abode of the local Deity who watches over their land and protects them from the forces of evil. Paintings by local artists show Sherpas praying and making offerings to this deity, whose name, Khumbu'i Yulha, means the "Country God of Khumbu." Although many Sherpas make their living by accompanying mountaineering expeditions to Everest, they would never dream of attempting Khumbila, which they regard as too sacred to be desecrated by climbers. Such an attempt would incur the wrath of the God and put their country in jeopardy. Some Sherpas believe that if they transgress or offend the deity, even in minor ways, He will send down yetis (abominable snowmen) to punish them.

Mount Kailas: One peak in the Himalayan region stands out above all others as the ultimate sacred mountain for more than half-a-billion people in India, Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan. Hidden behind the main range of the Himalayas at a high point of the Tibetan Plateau northwest of Nepal, Mount Kailas rises in isolated splendor near the sources of four major rivers of the

Indian subcontinent--the Indus, Brahmaputra, Sutlej and Karnali. Hindus also regard Kailas as the place where the divine form of the Ganges, the holiest river of all, cascades from heaven to first touch the Earth and course invisibly through the locks of Siva's hair before spewing forth from a glacier 140 miles to the west. Not far from the foot of the peak itself, at nearly 15,000 feet above sea level, reflecting the light of its snows, repose the calm blue waters of the most sacred lake of Hindu religion and mythology--holy Lake Manasarovar, "Lake of the Mind." The hardest of Hindu pilgrims aspire to take the long and dangerous journey over high passes to bathe in Manasarovar's icy waters and cleanse their minds of the sins that threaten to condemn them to the suffering of rebirth.

At only 22,028 feet, Kailas is thousands of feet lower than Everest and other Himalayan peaks. Yet its extraordinary setting and appearance more than make up for its modest height. Kailas retains its grandeur when viewed from a distance. More than any other peak in the Himalayas, it opens the mind to the cosmos around it, evoking a sense of infinite space that makes one aware of a vaster universe encompassing the limited world of ordinary experience. It has served as an inspiration for numerous Hindu temples and shrines in the distant plains of India. The sight of the peak has a powerful effect, bringing tears to the eyes of many who behold it, leaving them convinced that they have glimpsed the abode of the Gods beyond the round of life and death. Neither Hindus, Buddhists, nor any Tibetans would ever contemplate trying to climb Kailas.

Hindus view Kailas as the divine dwelling place of God Siva and

Goddess Parvati. There, as the Supreme Yogi, naked and smeared with ashes, His matted hair coiled on top of His head, He sits on a tiger skin, steeped in the indescribable bliss of meditation. From His position of aloof splendor on the summit, His third eye blazing with supernatural power and awareness, the lord of the mountain calmly surveys the joys and sorrows, the triumphs and tragedies, the entire play of illusion that make up life in the world below. The power of His meditation destroys the world of illusions that bind people to the painful cycle of death and rebirth. When He rises to dance, He takes on the functions of Brahma and Vishnu and creates and preserves the universe itself.

The [Buddhist] mandala of Demchog on Kailas presents the universe as a circle of mountains, oceans and continents arrayed around a mythical mountain at the very center. This mountain, called Meru by Hindus and Sumeru by Buddhists, plays a pivotal role in Hinduism and Buddhism as the divine axis of the cosmos. According to Hindu mythology, Brahma, the supreme deity in the form of the creator, lives on its summit, surrounded by lesser deities. Meru and Kailas appear as separate mountains in early texts of Buddhist and Hindu mythology, but later tradition has tended to bring them together and identify them as one and the same. Today many Indians and Tibetans view Kailas as the place where the invisible form of Meru breaks through to appear in the physical plane of existence. A pilgrimage to the mountain, therefore, represents for them a journey to the very center of the universe--the cosmic point where everything begins and ends, the divine source of all that exists and has significance. In circling the peak and paying homage to a vision of Siva or Demchog on its shining summit, they make contact with something deep within themselves that links them to the

supreme reality underlying and infusing the cosmos itself. For most Hindus and Buddhists of India and Tibet, the journey to Kailas is, in fact, the ultimate pilgrimage, both in terms of the sanctity of its goal and the difficulty of the way.

Goddess of Bliss: In addition to the paradise She shares with Siva on Kailas, Parvati has her abode on a number of other mountains. As Nanda Devi, the "Goddess of Bliss," She dwells in beauty on the lovely peak of that name in the Himalayas northeast of Delhi. The highest mountain in India outside the principality of Sikkim, Nanda Devi soars in alluring curves of rock and ice to culminate in a delicate summit, poised at 25,645 feet above a ring of snow peaks that form a sanctuary protecting the Goddess from all but Her most determined admirers. The only break in their otherwise impregnable wall of rock and snow is the terrifying gorge of the Rishi Ganga, one of the sources of the sacred Ganges, named after seven sages of Hindu mythology who fled the oppression of demons to seek refuge with the Goddess before departing this world to become enshrined as seven stars in the constellation of Ursa Major. Shepherds and porters from nearby villages who venture into the area believe that they can sometimes hear the sounds of these sages--drums beating, the blare of trumpets and the eerie barking of dogs. The few foreign mountaineers who manage to penetrate the gorge, inching their way along the sides of sheer cliffs that plunge thousands of feet into the river roaring below, find themselves in a paradise of gentle meadows filled with flowers at the foot of the sacred peak, which stands like a temple in the middle of the sanctuary itself.

Nanda Devi lies in Uttarakhand, the principal area of pilgrimage in the Indian Himalayas. This region ranks second

only to Kailas and Manasarovar in the degree of its sanctity for Hindus. Closer to the lowlands and much more accessible, it is visited by many more pilgrims, who come by the tens of thousands to bathe at Gomukh, the glacial source of the Ganges, and to worship at Kedarnath and Badrinath, lofty temples of Siva and Vishnu sequestered in narrow valleys beneath the icy thrones of the Gods themselves. The region is also the favorite haunt of holy men and wandering yogis, who come to follow the example of Siva and meditate in the sharp clear air of the heights, within sight of the peaks that lead to heaven and the goal they seek.

As the Goddess who resides on the highest mountain in the region, Nanda Devi has many shrines and temples dedicated to Her. One of the better-known ones is in the hill station of Almora, which affords one of the best views of the peak itself and the mountains that surround it. Although primarily a benevolent deity, Nanda can take on the form of Durga, the wrathful Goddess. The people of the region also view Nanda Devi as a benevolent source of life and renewal. According to ancient Hindu mythology, a flood once covered the entire world. A sage named Manu was warned of the impending disaster and built a boat in which he survived. Vishnu incarnated himself as a fish and towed the craft to safety on a mountain peak. As the waters receded, Manu together with his family and the remnants of all living creatures went down the slope to repopulate the Earth. The people of Uttarakhand identify the mountain of the flood as Nanda Devi, and one local group, the Rajis, still regard the peak as the abode of their ancestors. According to one legend, the seven sages accompanied Manu and remained behind to dwell in the company of the Goddess.

Annapurna and Machapuchare: Goddess Parvati dwells in yet another form on sacred Annapurna One, named like Nanda Devi for the deity said to reside on its summit. A range of peaks that includes Gangapurna, Machapuchare and Annapurnas One through Four, Annapurna rises in one long sweep above the lush green hills of central Nepal. Seen from the tropical valley of Pokhara in the twilight before dawn, the range's peaks appear to float like bluish-gray icebergs on a sea of liquid shadows. Etched with shadowed flutings, the corrugated face of Annapurna One--the highest summit at 26,545-feet--becomes a golden backdrop to the slender pointed peak of Machapuchare, the "Fish's Tail."

Annapurna means in Sanskrit "She who is filled with food." Unlike Nanda Devi, who can take on the wrathful form of Durga, Annapurna is regarded as a purely benevolent deity. A kindhearted Goddess of plenty, She is the Queen of Banaras, the holy city of the Hindus on the banks of the Ganges south of Nepal. Each year, after the autumn harvest, the people of Banaras celebrate a festival dedicated to Her called Annakuta, the "Food Mountain," in which they fill Her temple with a mountain of food--rice, lentils, and sweets of all kinds to be distributed to those who come to receive Her blessings.

Within the heart of the range lies a hidden basin of beautiful meadows and glaciers, resembling the sanctuary surrounding Nanda Devi. A curtain of rock and ice draped between mountains soaring to over 26,000 feet completely encloses this natural amphitheater, dropping nowhere lower than 19,000 feet except at one place. There, an incredible gorge 12,000 feet deep slices through this otherwise impregnable barrier, right beneath the overhanging cliffs and glaciers of

Machapuchare, one of the loveliest peaks in the Himalayas.

Machapuchare stands guard over the gorge leading into the sanctuary. Machapuchare's delicate summit will sometimes materialize out of the mist at sunset, to appear suspended in a golden haze almost 15,000 feet directly overhead at an altitude of 22,943 feet above sea level. The mountain is so imposing that for the people living near Annapurna, it acts like a magnet, drawing to itself whatever deity they regard as the highest and most powerful. Villagers with whom I spoke referred to it variously as the abode of the Hindu Gods Vishnu and Siva, a local deity named Pujinim Barahar, and Tara, "the Savioress of Tibetan Buddhism," as well as Amitabha, "the Buddha of Boundless Light."

A small expedition led by Wilfred Noyce, a British climber of Everest fame, nearly reached the summit in 1957. Grooves of slick blue ice stopped them only 150 feet from the top. Realizing that the Deity of the mountain had defeated them, they turned back and descended without regrets, content with what they had achieved. After their attempt, the government of Nepal declared Machapuchare a sacred peak, off-limits to all climbers. And it remains to this day unclimbed, one of the few places left on Earth reserved for the Gods.