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MOUNTAINS AND MYTHOLOGY

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The symbolic values of a mountain are primarily:

1. The movement upwards. The eye moves upwards as an expression of elevation, increase of any positive kind.
2. Ascension. A person moving upwards is symbol of a person increasing in every positive way.
3. Highness. The elevation reached and the difference in altitude in comparison to the environment, symbolizes excellence, nobility, majesty, steadiness, coolness, superiority.
4. Transcendence. Every "ascension" is a passage to the beyond, a rupture of the level, a passage from the region of the trivial or profane to that of sur-passing, over-whelming importance. In short; to reach the mountain top is to trans-cend the human condition, reaching the unreachable.
5. A mountain is the nearest to heaven. Or, mountains "touch" the heavens, and are therefore considered to be "the center" in the sense of the meeting-place between the heavenly and the earthly.
6. The struggle towards the summit, towards the *highest* quality. The way up, the difficulty, the fatigue, of this struggle. Ritual ascension is a "difficult ascension".
7. The unreachable. The passage to the beyond, "trans-cendence", may be possible or not possible for humans. The highly valued unclimbableness of mountains symbolizes the unreachableness of the absolute - absolute virtue, power or also immortality.

The symbolic situation of human is in a long and varied cultural tradition conceived as an unstable and dynamic condition. In the vertical dimension humans are always in a condition of elevation or fall. They neither can reach a summit nor fall to the absolute bottom. They cannot rest without falling, nor can they attain any height definitely: They cannot dwell or occupy the height. They are always on the way, up or down. They are longing for the paradise, but are unfit to stay there.

All the major "ideals" which humans struggle towards are more or less unattainable. Only his hypocrisy and untruthfulness can give the passing sense of having reached the ideal.

Some of the symbolic values of mountains are such that *for humans to reach* the summit involves transgression or violation of a cultural belief or attitude. In a Chinese cultural tradition it is a plus for a human being to climb its sacred mountain. In Hindu and Tibetan cultural traditions, it is often not. The people below the sacred mountain Gauri Shankar (Tseringma, "The Mother of the Long Good Life") voted unanimously for forbidding expeditions to try to scale

it. But the government of Nepal did not even react to their formal request not to open access to the mighty walls of the great peak - for economic reasons.<sup>2</sup>

The ideal, the unreachable *is not reached!* The terrifying condition of being always on the way, of being unable to reject the ideals, is transcended. The unconquerable is conquered.

Thus the ascension of the great , seen symbolically, is a profanation, a negation of the difference between God and humans, also the death of the urge to mount any further.

But the climbers find that they cannot rest, so they climb more summits, and perfect their equipment until it no longer is any supreme achievement to reach the summits. They abdicate as symbols of the unreachable.

Against this trend of thinking there is a trend to accept the terrifying condition of being essentially on the way. But unreachableness of all we long for, of all ideas that can command our respect, is acknowledged. The meaningfulness and joyfulness of the struggle "upwards" is also acknowledged.

In recognition of this, the few unclimbed, old, majestic mountains, which for thousands of years in many cultures have been supreme symbols of the unreachable, should be left unclimbed.

## Notes:

1. See e.g. Eliade, M., *Traite de l'histoire des religions*, Paris, 1968, p. 62 *et seq.*
2. For interesting cultural anthropology of mountains, see Michael Tobias, ed., *Deep Ecology*, Avant Books, 1985.

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