May 14: Darchen, the parikrama base camp

Leaving Manasarovar in the afternoon, our group arrived at Darchen, a little before five in the evening. We had to stay in a small campus with rows of dormitories meant for pilgrims. Each dorm accommodated four or five. While we had no problem with the space, the common toilets were rather dirty. Despite all that, I am grateful to Darchen. Here, I found medicine for cold and cough. I took a dose and miraculously, was well within an hour. For me this was a miracle of Shiva for just an hour before I took the dose, I was feeling so unwell, I was planning to drop the idea of Mount Kailash parikrama.

May 15: At death’s door and Shiva’s doorstep

At about 3:15 a.m. the next morning, as I emerged from my room, I happened to glance in the direction of Manasarovar Lake and was overjoyed to see the Shiva star, visible even though we were three-four kilometres away from the lake itself. I considered it a great blessing.

We repacked our backpacks, the parikrama limited our luggage to absolute necessities. By 9 a.m. everyone was ready. Despite being sleep-deprived and not having showered for several days, all faces beamed with excitement. I felt as fit as a fiddle. After all, we were about to embark on the journey of a lifetime. As soon as the bus came, we hurriedly got into it. After travelling for about forty-five minutes, we reached Yama Dwarr—‘gateway to the god of death’—in Tarboche. It is an open plateau at the foothills of Mount Kailash from where we were to begin our pilgrimage. It is the initial point of circumambulation of Mount Kailash. We were supposed to enter through this Dwarr, go out the other side and come back to the starting point. We had to do this three times before commencing our parikrama. I was told that, by doing this, one received the blessings of Lord Yama and left all fear of death behind. From this place, we were very glad to see the resplendent southern face of Mount Kailash fully covered in snow. It was delightful to see the beauty of the mountains surrounding us.

Only twenty of the forty-nine in our group decided to go for the parikrama; the rest chose to remain at Darchen. We were very enthusiastic about the journey ahead. It was supposed to be a test of our perseverance, sincerity and devotion as well as our physical fitness. I noticed that adjacent to Yama Dwarr, was a mound on which were placed many pieces of stone bearing holy inscriptions. I could recognise the holy Tibetan mantra: Om Mani Padme Hum written in the Tibetan script. The mantra invokes the benevolent attention of Chenrezig, the embodiment of compassion, and is found in lands influenced by Tibetan Buddhism.

From Yama Dwarr, we walked about
a kilometre to get the porters and horses. But when we reached the place, we discovered there were not enough porters for all of us. In about half-an-hour, the members of our Sherpa team came forward to help and we could start our trek. We were given packed lunch, most of which we distributed among Tibetan children present there. During the whole parikrama, we did not have anything except a few sips of water and a few roasted almonds.

The journey started through a valley that afforded us a breathtaking view of mountains towering on either side with a dusty road weaving through them. Not a single tree stood there till our sight could see. The vast spread of barren land and mountains made me realize how small and insignificant man is before these wonders of nature. After about two kilometres, the route was a little elevated but still not particularly difficult. The scenery was breathtaking, certainly a photographer’s delight. We were in awe. It really did not matter that we were at an altitude of 5082 metres with scant oxygen, bone-freezing cold, strong winds and ultra-violet rays. Our efforts at acclimatisation had borne fruit. We kept moving merrily, chanting, discussing philosophy and thoroughly enjoying the beauty surrounding us. We came across many beautiful pure white frozen streams. In every direction we looked, we found nature at its best. We walked three-four kilometres.

On the way, we saw some Tibetans completing their parikrama by lying flat, face-down on the ground, their foreheads touching the earth and rising only to repeat it after taking a step forward. We were really touched by their devotion. Suddenly we saw the west face of Mount Kailash which seemed to be enveloped in compassion and benevolence. It was snow-capped while all the surrounding mountains seemed barren and dry. What a sight! We bowed reverentially. I started observing my beloved Mount Kailash with greater intensity. Whatever was in my mind started appearing as images. Time seemed to stand still. At one point I saw the silhouette of Lord Shiva sitting in meditation.

After walking for about five-six kilometres, we took a break and had Tibetan coffee in a cozy Tibetan tea house. Then we resumed our journey. It seemed as if I was in a dream. Suddenly I was jolted back from my beautiful dream when I noticed Ramakrishnan, a member of our group, having difficulty in breathing. I was concerned. Fortunately, the Sherpa who was carrying the oxygen was walking only a small distance ahead. I called him and requested him to put Ramakrishnan on oxygen. After that, our progress slowed considerably and the trek seemed endless. We took a break every thirty steps. Ramakrishnan had to frequently take oxygen and sip water. I was really worried but did not express anything, just tried to do whatever I could to make him comfortable. At that moment, we saw two
ladies from Bangalore, Suchitra and Shaila, coming behind us. Seeing Ramakrishnan’s condition, they too sat with us. Suchitra taught us some simple breathing exercises to facilitate breathing which helped immensely, and we were able to resume our trek. After a little while, I had a glimpse of the north face of Mount Kailash. I was spellbound and found the moment so magical that I wanted to freeze it forever in my memory.

We had to drag ourselves in the last kilometre. The guest house seemed close, just beyond the hill, but the moment we crossed the hill corner, another slope appeared. The path seemed unending but walking slowly and cautiously, we finally reached Derapuk, the night halt point at around 8 p.m. Finally, we were at Lord Shiva’s doorstep!

We were to stay in a newly built guest house with dormitories. Ramakrishnan crashed onto his bed as soon as he reached the dormitory. Other pilgrims staying in our room were in a similar state. Some were on oxygen, some were simply too weak or tired to lift up their heads. I seemed to be the only active, energetic person in the room and tried to help everyone in whatever way I could.

The weather was clear and the sun had not yet set. After arranging the things in the room and helping my co-pilgrims, I ran outside to take a few shots of Mount Kailash against the backdrop of the setting sun. The spot offered the closest view of Mount Kailash. The rays of a late sun had bathed the mountain in golden hues. I kept watching this awe-inspiring view until darkness surrounded me. High velocity winds were blowing. I wanted to walk around and explore the surroundings but it was already dark and since all seven people in our room were unwell, I knew no one would be able to accompany me. I dropped the idea of venturing out. It was great to see all twenty pilgrims complete the first day of parikrama around Kailash successfully. We were fortunate to see all faces of the great Mount Kailash.

**Blissful Night Adventure**

After dinner, everyone in our room went to sleep. But I was not sleepy at all. So, at about 10.30 p.m., I sneaked out of the room to the balcony from where Mount Kailash could be seen. What beauty exploded before my eyes! The moon was shining with all its glory. I could have read a book in that light. But all my attention was on the mountain, now draped in shimmering silver. Mesmerised, I felt as if...
I was forgetting time and space. I wanted to share this heart-warming, soul-stirring view with someone but everyone was fast asleep. How long I remained entranced I do not know but I was jolted out of it by the cold wind biting my skin. I performed a mental worship of Lord Shiva and thanked Him for giving all of us the strength to complete the pilgrimage the way we wished to do it. I also offered obeisance to Lord Kailash on behalf of all the monastic members of our sangha and the devotees.

The wind had become really unbearable, but I was still reluctant to move. I looked at my watch, it was 2.30 a.m. I came back to my room, went off to sleep and woke up in the morning with the happy memories of the previous night’s blissful experience.

**May 16: Back to Darchen**

I was relieved to find everyone had recovered from the high altitude sickness and looked bright and happy next morning. I hurried outside to catch the sunrise. The mountain peaks were covered in gold and I was yet again fascinated. As I stood there watching the holy Kailash completely bathed in sunlight, I experienced a strange feeling of inner warmth and a sense of fulfillment. But like all magic, this too lasted for just a few minutes.

After an early breakfast, we traced the same way back to base-camp and reached Darchen at around 2 p.m. People who had not gone for parikrama gave us a hearty welcome. We had lunch and immediately started for Nyalam. We reached at about 6 p.m.

**May 17, 18: Kathmandu**

Very early the next day, we started from Darchen for the China-Nepal border. We reached Kathmandu at around 5 p.m. We were staying at Vaishali Hotel and I took my first shower in eight days! It was such a relief to be able to shed all the woollen layers and get into summer clothes again.

On May 18, we set out for a local sightseeing tour. Six of us hired a cab and visited the Surya Vinayak Temple dedicated to the Hindu deity Lord Ganesh; the Doleshwar Mahadev Temple—believed to contain the head of the bull-shaped Hindu deity Shiva worshipped at Kedarnath; the Patan Darbar Square, a world heritage site and the social, religious and urban focal point of the city and the Pashupatinath temple. On the way, we engaged in philosophical discussion.

**May 19: Back to Delhi**

The next day, at 10.30 a.m. we set out for the airport. Just before boarding
the plane, we exchanged contact details and promises to keep in touch. I was very fortunate to have met a group of such nice people who became like my family on this journey. They helped me tremendously in every way. I would not have made it without them.

During this pilgrimage, I learnt that a positive attitude goes a long way in making such a daunting endeavour successful. It is important to remember that irrespective of the operator and the amount paid, the accommodation available will be very basic, toilets will be invariably dirty, food and water unhygienic, the terrain hostile and the climate unpredictable. But if we wish to enjoy, against all these odds, we should have a positive, optimistic attitude to take all our experiences with a spirit of adventure, we must be willing to put up with everything, adjust as much as possible with a team spirit. The reward will be an unforgettable experience of a wonderful pilgrimage.

The time that I spent in Mount Kailash and Manasarovar was very special. It was a different world altogether. I feel truly blessed to have seen the magical, majestic and serene Mount Kailash which radiates the aura of spirituality throughout the Himalayan region. My mind is still full of the glorious visions and the unique sense of calmness, joy and peace. It was truly an experience of a lifetime to be cherished forever. Om Namah Shivaya!

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**Hymn to Lord Shiva**

_Salutations to Lord Shiva, whose glory is immeasurable,_  
_Who resembles the sky in its clearness,_ 
_To whom are attributed the phenomena-_  
_Of creation, preservation and dissolution of the universe!_  
_May the burning devotion of my life,_  
_Attach itself to Him, to Shiva,_  
_Who while being the Lord of all, transcends Himself!_  

_Swami Vivekananda_