

Horizons of Possibilities: The *Telos* of Contemporary Himalayan Travel

Christopher Howard

For many years, I have been moved by the blue at the far edge of what can be seen, that colour of horizons, of remote mountain ranges, of anything far away. The colour of that distance is the colour of an emotion, the colour of solitude and of desire, the colour of there seen from here, the colour of where you are not. And the colour of where you can never go.¹

Meaning is the continual actualization of potentialities ... the unity of actualization and virtualization, of re-actualization and re-virtualization, as a self-propelling process.²

Travel always takes place within a horizon of possibilities. This paper addresses the question of why certain people travel to a certain part of the world, while also addressing the more fundamental question of why people travel at all. Based on a mobile, multi-sited ethnography conducted in 2011 in Nepal and north-eastern India researching western travellers, I highlight the role the imagination plays not only in motivating corporeal travel, but in pre-structuring travel imaginaries which impinge upon actual journeys. Following this, I discuss the motives, goals, and desires of travellers in the middle Himalayan region,³ showing how such journeys commonly revolved around three themes, identified as: coming to the source or origin of spiritual traditions, having 'exotic' cultural experiences, and seeking bodily challenges amidst the highest mountains on earth. After examining these often intertwined themes and arguing for greater attention to the relationship between the imagination and corporeal travel, I conclude by offering my interpretation of

Christopher Howard is a PhD Candidate in Social Anthropology and a Senior Tutor in the School of English and Media Studies and the School of People, Environment and Planning at Massey University, Auckland.

¹ Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (New York: Penguin, 2006), p. 29.

² Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 65.

³ The middle Himalayan region is comprised of Nepal, Bhutan, north-eastern India, Tibet, and south-western China. My fieldwork took place principally in, around, and in-between the Kathmandu valley and Pokhara in Nepal, and Dharamsala, Darjeeling, and Sikkim in India.

what the overall *telos*, or ultimate aims, of contemporary Himalayan travel centres on.⁴

To begin, I would like to present a transcript outlining one traveller's goals for visiting the middle Himalayas. John had recently returned to New Zealand after spending two months in Nepal and was recounting his "grand adventure" in an email to family, friends, and this grateful researcher:

It was an amazing and grand adventure! Spending sixty days trekking in Nepal twas [sic] a brilliant way to celebrate turning sixty this year. I went over with a few goals, and will tell you what they were so this [his subsequent travel narrative] has some organization to it:

- To experience as much of the Nepalese way of life (especially in the remote areas) as possible
- To have an adventure where I never knew from day to day where I would be staying or what I would be eating
- To experience the spirituality of the region - both the Buddhist and the Hindu based spirituality
- To try to find a way to do some meaningful volunteer work
- To exist in the lap of the mother of all mountain ranges - as mountains are a huge part of my love of life
- To immerse myself in a life of walking, where no alternative form of transportation exists and the locals all rely on walking too
- To celebrate the retirement of my adventure mate Shahe with him and my running mate Peter's first travels out of the US
- To see how comfortable I was above the height of Mt Whitney, 14,500 feet (approx. 4,300 meters), the highest I had ever been
- To see for myself the schools, hospitals, bridges, and water systems that New Zealand's own Edmund Hillary helped the Nepalese to build.
- It was my first trip on my NZ passport [John is originally American], so the last goal I listed was important to me[.]

I open with John's list of goals not only because it provides a clear picture of one traveller's reasons for making a Himalayan journey, but because it represents the general pattern of overlapping goals and desires I observed in

⁴ I use *telos* in a general way to refer to the motives, goals, and ideals that guide purposeful action. In contrast to Aristotelian or Hegelian understandings, I do not take *telos* as directed towards fixed, ultimate 'ends.' Rather, I view *teleology* in terms of guiding sets of principles or reasons that direct meaningful action. Such action is not organised around predetermined ends, but around ideals and imagined futures that unfold in experience and remain open to certain extents.

most travellers I interviewed in Nepal, India, and elsewhere.⁵ Like most Himalayan travellers, John's trip was multi-dimensional, aimed at achieving a number of specific goals within a single journey that was seen overall as a "grand adventure." In this sense, contemporary Himalayan travel tends to fit with pilgrimage and tourism research that recognises the overlapping features inherent in many quests.⁶ Like other travellers I interviewed, John's journey encompassed shifting between multiple temporary roles: sometimes a pilgrim, other times an ethnic tourist, or an amateur ethnographer, or an eco-adventurer, while still others a 'voluntourist.' Moreover, we can see that John's trip related more broadly to his lifestyle (love of mountains and walking), and spiritual interests, orientation, and life stage (retirement, turning sixty, becoming a New Zealand citizen). Like John, many travellers I interviewed were in transitional phases or turning points; either between jobs, relationships, careers, or studies. Himalayan adventures often functioned as structural breaks and an opportunity for gaining perspective, seeking answers or reconciliation to both practical and existential questions, achieving personal growth and extending horizons. As journeys "redolent with meaning,"⁷ such quests were integrated more generally into what Giddens calls the late modern "reflexive project of the self."⁸ As such, travelling, especially in meaning-centred forms, cannot be viewed in isolation from the broader lifeworlds of individuals, whose travel experiences always remain situated within the overall continuity of life. In other words, while travel represents a series of *experiences* within *experience*, the boundaries separating the two remain hazy and, depending on one's

⁵ I conducted some interviews in New Zealand, with people who had previously visited the Himalayas or were planning on doing so. I also followed up with travellers I met in the field once they had returned to their home countries, or were still travelling, via email and Skype.

⁶ Ellen Badone and Sharon Roseman (eds), *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Erik Cohen, 'Pilgrimage and Tourism: Convergence and Divergence,' in *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage*, ed. Alan Morinis (Westford, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992); Simon Coleman and John Eade (eds), *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion* (London: Routledge, 2004); N. Collins-Kreiner, 'Researching Pilgrimage: Continuity and Transformations,' *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 37, no. 2 (2010), pp. 440-456; Daniel Olsen and Timothy Dallen (eds), *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Bryan Pfaffenberger, 'Serious Pilgrims and Frivolous Tourists: The Chimera of Tourism in the Pilgrimages of Sri Lanka,' *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1983), pp. 57-74; Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978).

⁷ Justine Digance, 'Pilgrimage at Contested Sites,' *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2003), p. 143.

⁸ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

ontological position, artificial. This then raises a temporal question of when, and if, journeys actually begin and end.

Along with travel experiences, *a priori* motivations, expectations, and perceptions are identified by Ian Reader as important considerations for research aimed at capturing the complex, multidimensional nature of pilgrimages.⁹ While contemporary Himalayan travel often exhibits pilgrimage characteristics, for the reasons outlined above, I avoid rigid ‘ideal type’ classifications,¹⁰ taking the phenomenon to be a case of ‘complex leisure,’¹¹ and I thus simply refer to the people I interviewed as ‘travellers.’ Now that we have previewed the types of goals that drive Himalayan travel, let us turn to the role the imagination plays in motivating and constructing travel.

Imaginary Mobility, Worldmaking, and the Will to Travel

The aims and ideals that move us are generated through imagination.

But they are not made out of imaginary stuff. They are made out of the hard stuff of the world of physical and social experience.¹²

The modes of travel that individuals adopt are best understood genealogically, as historically contingent practices in which previous representations and practices influence and build upon those that follow, albeit in adapted forms.¹³

While travellers exercise agentic qualities, from a systems theory perspective they may also be thought of as what Luhmann calls “mediums of communication”; active receivers and processors of various already existent and disseminating images, representations, and discourses.¹⁴ Communicative processes are recursive in that they recycle, blend, and integrate received media with individual experience. In the case of travel, media is transmitted from various cultural productions such as literatures, films, guidebooks, documentaries, and other texts in an ongoing communicative process that works to shape receivers’ perceptions, expectations, and projections of places before they are actually encountered. In other words, through media representations, travellers come to *know* places such as India or Nepal before

⁹ Ian Reader, ‘Pilgrimage Growth in the Modern World: Meanings and Implications,’ *Religion*, vol. 37, no. 3 (2007), pp. 210-229.

¹⁰ Daniel Olsen, ‘Pilgrims, Tourists and Max Weber’s “Ideal Types”,’ *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 37, no. 3 (2010), pp. 848-851.

¹¹ Lise Kjølørød, ‘How Innocent is our Scientific Vocabulary? Rethinking Recent Sociological Conceptualizations of Complex Leisure,’ *Sociology*, vol. 43, no. 2 (2009), pp. 371-387.

¹² John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (London: Yale University Press, 1934), p. 49.

¹³ Judith Adler, ‘Origins of Sightseeing,’ *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 16, no. 1 (1989), pp. 7-29.

¹⁴ Luhmann, *Social Systems*.

departing for them. Cognitive blending processes create versions of places and certain *a priori* “narrative imaginings,”¹⁵ not only of how places will be, but of how they themselves will possibly be transformed by visiting them.

Such processes may be imaginary, but, as Dewey says, they are not made from “imaginary stuff”; rather, they are made from blends of images and representations that already exist in the world and are integrated with social experience. Pragmatist philosopher Nelson Goodman calls this process ‘worldmaking,’ and emphasises that the ‘worlds’ actors construct are always made from, and build upon, pre-existing worlds: “Worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is remaking.”¹⁶ Phenomenologists similarly take the historical facticity of a world which always presupposes our being in it as the starting point for analysing how subsequent worlds are not so much ‘made’ as ‘disclosed.’¹⁷ Psychoanalytic approaches emphasise how by virtue of being born into pre-existing symbolic systems that operate on all levels of thought and experience, human beings always remain in the realm of the imaginary. Perhaps with such perspectives in mind, Chris Rojek observes how travel involves mobility through internal landscapes that are sculpted by personal experience and cultural influences, as well as movement through physical space.¹⁸

Cervantes’ Don Quixote represents a paradigmatic example of a worldmaking traveller whose imagination, fantasies, and desires precede and merge with his actual travels. Blurring the boundaries between fantasy and reality, Don Quixote constructs his adventures and sense of identity from medieval tales of errant knights, which he read passionately from the comfort and safety of his bed before finally, late in life, setting off on his own (imaginary) hero quest. I was reminded of Don Quixote by a traveller I met in Kathmandu named Roman, who explained his travel motives as the following:

Ever since I was a very small child I wanted to travel, take journeys like the ones in the adventure novels that my parents would read to us as young children. It was this yearning for adventure and Robert’s [an organiser/leader of yearly trips to the Himalayas] kind nudging that landed me in India the first time.

¹⁵ Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 20-21.

¹⁶ Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1978), p. 6.

¹⁷ While worldmaking is a useful theory for research on the meanings and implications of travel, the constructivist emphasis on ‘making’ is in danger of attributing too much agentic power to the ‘worldmaker.’ A phenomenological perspective would argue that because human beings are co-constituted by already existent worlds, travellers are acted upon and are hence ‘made’ by those worlds that they inhabit and move through.

¹⁸ Chris Rojek, ‘McDisneyization and Post-Tourism,’ in *Touring Cultures: Transformations of Travel and Theory*, eds Chris Rojek and John Urry (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 97.

A passionate traveller and documentary filmmaker who currently lives in San Francisco, Roman was on one of many trips to the middle Himalayas. When asked about his expectations and perceptions before his first visit, he responded:

Having been through the blender of expectations versus reality more than a few times in India, I have become more adept at feeding my anticipation rather than expectation for these trips to the Himalayas. I must say though that the first time I came to Kathmandu I was secretly expecting a little more of an Indiana Jones place, only because the movie stuck in my head as a child.

Roman was not the first or last traveller I met who cited Indiana Jones as playing a part in shaping their initial expectations of the Himalayan region and contributing to their general thirst for adventure and exploration. Like Don Quixote, Himalayan travellers in this sense resembled Lévi-Strauss' *bricoleurs*, practical subjects who tinker and experiment with already existent objects to create mythopoetic images of the world.¹⁹

The majority of Himalayan travellers I spoke with claimed that films and various literatures played the largest role in informing their images, perceptions, and expectations of the Himalayas. Sometimes these impressions could be traced as far back as childhood, as was the case with Roman and another traveller named Jason, whom I met on a long, rather gruelling bus ride between Kathmandu and Pokhara. I asked Jason if he could say what planted the earliest seed of his interest in coming to Nepal and India. After some thought, he recalled his childhood encounter with the picture book and cartoon, *Rikki-Tikki-Tavi* (a short story in Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*). He explained how he was struck by exotic animals such as the mongoose and cobra, as well as by the unique colours and images of landscapes that were different from what he observed in his native California. From then on, Jason explained how he would frequent the library and check out every book on India he could get his hands on, dreaming of making his own journey there one day. Jason's curiosity towards India and Asia more generally would lead him to eventually pursue higher degrees in Asian Studies from the University of Hawaii's renowned East-West centre. At thirty-eight, he was fluent in three Asian languages and had been working as an environmental planner in China, Indonesia, and Cambodia for the past ten years. Having just finished a two-year contract in Phnom Penh, his journey through India and Nepal was part of a larger 'round-the-world' trip, during which time his broad goals were described simply as "to explore," and "to take some time, find some new

¹⁹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), pp. 72-73.

inspiration and figure out where to go from here.” “Funny,” he told me on our long bus ride, “if I really think about where all this [travelling] all started, how I ended up going here, there, and everywhere, I guess it all began with *Rikki-Tikki-Tavi*. That’s pretty interesting to think about...” Jason’s reflection here raises the underlying temporal question of when journeys actually begin, and highlights the role the imagination plays in taking people ‘on the road.’

Another participant I interviewed in New Zealand, a poet named Avery, had previously spent six months in India, in which most of her time was spent studying yoga at an ashram in Rishikesh, the ‘yoga capital of the world’ and a mecca for global spiritual seekers, located in northern India. When I asked about her expectations and perceptions prior to departing, she explained:

I knew a little about India, and most of my information had come from yoga books, pictures I had seen in the media, movies like *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Little Buddha*, and Bollywood. Before I went I think I saw India as a very large, complex, and spiritual place. Generally though, I had little knowledge of India, although I did have quite a lot of knowledge about the yogic tradition in India, and yoga as a practice.

Numerous participants made similar claims about where they believed their images, perceptions, and expectations of the Himalayas had come from; mainly books, films, and other media. Like Avery, many travellers professed to have limited knowledge of the region. Four travellers claimed that seeing Wes Anderson’s 2007 film, *The Darjeeling Limited*, played a central role in inspiring them to come to India. Marisa, a twenty-two year old traveller from New York, told me:

I saw this movie at the end of high school and ever since I wanted to go to India. I wanted to ride trains, end up in strange, random places and weird situations, wear the funky outfits and you know, have a spiritual adventure, just like in the film. The music, the colours, it all really captivated me at I guess an impressionable age. I wanted to go right after graduating, but I went to college. But now that I’m finished, and there’s no jobs and everything’s gone to hell anyway, I came.

Sipping tea high up in Darjeeling, Marisa and I mused on how, despite the title, we discovered that in the film the characters never actually go to the Himalayan hill station. The fact that her imagination and expectations did not match the film in this way did not particularly bother Marisa. She stated, however, that: “Yeah when I got here, I was like, so this is Darjeeling? Hey, they never came here. I think they actually were somewhere in Rajasthan.” Nevertheless, she described India as “infinitely interesting ... full of beauty, ugliness, life and death. You can learn a lot in a single day here.” From Darjeeling she continued north to Sikkim, crossed into Nepal by bus and

eventually visited Tibet. Months later, back in New York and working temp jobs, I heard from Marisa:

Everything is easy after India. When I arrived [in India] I cried for like three days and was too afraid to even leave my hotel room. Being back in New York, a city which used to feel pretty intimidating now is a piece of cake. India teaches you about the things that really matter – basic things like love, simply living and surviving. Here people are caught up in so much stuff that really doesn't matter at all. It's sad but also makes me laugh. Being back, I feel lighter and in a way more free, cause I've seen how different life can be, how hard, but also just how simple.

Marisa expressed being transformed by her Himalayan travel experience, as did many other travellers I met who appeared to be searching for just that.

Discussing the connections between films and tourism in the Australian outback, Frost demonstrates how films that take urban dwellers into frontier zones follow “strong storyline patterns which essentially take the form of a series of ‘promises’”:

The key promise is that a tourist to this exotic locale will be changed. In many cases, the change presented is a positive one. The tourist is changed from being bored, alienated, frustrated or stagnant to being re-energised, a better person, more tolerant of others, perhaps even spiritually uplifted. The causes of the change are a combination of wilderness, isolation and interaction with people who live a simpler life. Essentially the frontier is a transformer, an antidote to the travails of urban life. The process is mysterious, perhaps even magical – and that is part of the appeal. There is also possibly danger, which may be negative, but the risk may also be energising and attractive. The Outback is not a comfortable mass tourism destination, it is a place on the edge.²⁰

I found that similar patterns and relationships based on frontier “promises” existed between travellers and the films they claimed inspired them to have adventures in the Himalayas. Numerous participants, like Avery, reported having been inspired in part to visit the Himalayas by the film *Seven Years in Tibet*. The 1997 film, much like James Hilton's famous utopian novel, *Lost Horizon* (1933), portrays Tibet as a mysterious, spiritual land, lost in time and hidden from a destructive modern world; a frontier zone *par excellence*. Like *The Darjeeling Limited*, it is interesting to note that *Seven Years in Tibet* was not filmed in the actual location viewers imagine. In *Virtual Tibet*, journalist Orville Schell points out that for political reasons the filming took place not in the Tibetan Himalayas, but on the other side of the world in the Andes of

²⁰ Warwick Frost, ‘Life Changing Experiences: Film and Tourists in the Australian Outback,’ *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 37, no. 3 (2010), p. 723.

Argentina.²¹ In this sense, the Himalayas become a utopia in the literal sense of the term, a ‘placeless place.’ The film offers an exotic, utopian re-presentation of the Himalayas while narrating the transformative adventure of Austrian adventurer Heinrich Harre in a mystical land represented as the antithesis to a violent and disenchanting modern world. In my interviews and like Frost’s observations on the connections between films and frontier travel, I found that travellers approached the middle Himalayas as a place that “promised” positive transformations, a narrative imagining very much in accord with the films they watched and the books they read.

Along with popular films such as *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997), *Little Buddha* (1993), *Kundun* (1997), *The Darjeeling Limited* (2007) and *Eat Pray Love* (2010), various literatures also played a major role in shaping travellers’ perceptions of the Himalayas and motivating their journeys to them. The most popular genres travellers cited in relation to their motivations for coming to the Himalayas were spiritual literature. Books by the Dalai Lama such as the *Art of Happiness*,²² Yogananda’s *Autobiography of a Yogi*,²³ and other Eastern ‘spiritual classics,’ were frequently cited by travellers as having been read before their journeys, as well as during them. In popular hill stations such as Dharamsala and Darjeeling in north India, and in Kathmandu and Pokhara in Nepal, second-hand bookstores stocking such titles abound. Along with more active pursuits such as practicing yoga or mountain trekking, I found many travellers spent large amounts of time in cafés and restaurants absorbed in books. I often observed travellers engrossed in books with the words such as “mindfulness,” “wisdom,” and “loving kindness” on the covers, giving the impression that these journeys were as much about inner transformation, spiritual contemplation, and self-improvement as outward adventure.²⁴ As

²¹ Orville Schell, *Virtual Tibet: Searching for Shangri-la from the Himalayas to Hollywood* (New York: Holt, 2000).

²² Dalai Lama (Bstandzinrgya), *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living* (London: Penguin Putnam, 1998).

²³ Paramhansa Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi* (Kolkata: Yogoda Satsanga Society of India, 2005).

²⁴ Eastern spiritual literature, however, was not the only literature that was read. In the bookstores, there seemed to be exceptional amounts of novels by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Umberto Eco, and Paul Coelho, as well as literary travel writings by authors such as Bruce Chatwin and Paul Theroux, among others. I spent a week in Nepal with an American student of Buddhism named Dave, who typically read a book a day. I myself read more novels during my three month trip than I had read in the past several years. The shifting experience of exploring the world imaginatively through literature while corporeally exploring foreign worlds may affect one’s experience in certain ways and in some cases augment the transformative potential of travelling. The interplay between reading and travelling

many Himalayan travellers were interested in eastern spirituality, particularly yoga and Buddhist meditation, it appeared that books such as these fuelled desires for what travellers often described as ‘coming to the source.’

Coming to the Source, Making Breaks, and Seeking Transformation

Avery, the poet from New Zealand, responded to the question of why she had decided to travel to India in the following way:

I wanted to go to India because I had been studying yoga for two years, and I wanted to learn about yoga in the birthplace of the practice. I think I also wanted to get away from the life I had in New Zealand at the time. I'd had a bad breakup a few years beforehand, and I was working for an organisation where there was a lot of conflict and egocentric behaviour, both of which made me very unhappy. Going to India was a way of exploring a part of myself that I was discovering through yoga – a more thoughtful and mindful part of myself. I wanted to go and do a yoga teacher training, as I had a vague vision of being a yoga teacher, so that was my motivation. I also just enjoy visiting new places as travel expands my awareness and understanding of the world we live in, and of myself.

In Avery's account we can see multiple motives and overlapping ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors²⁵ explaining why she had decided to go to India. Expressing dissatisfaction and a desire to break out of her present life-situation in New Zealand, she felt drawn to India because it appealed to her interest and desire to explore herself through the practice of yoga in its birthplace, and to expand her “awareness and understanding of the world.” Moreover, in making a break with her previous situation – marked by a conflictive, egocentric work environment and a bad breakup – going to India to study yoga marked the actualisation of a potential turning point in Avery's life path. Driven by “a vague vision of being a yoga teacher” because the practice was perceived to positively cultivate a more “thoughtful and mindful” part of herself, her journey to India centred on an imaginary of transformation and the actualisation of potentialities. Avery's story was not particularly unique. I encountered many would-be yoga teachers in Nepal and India whose teleologies revolved around re-direction, self-transformation, and cultivating *eudemonia*, happiness and ‘well-being.’ In his research on spiritual tourism in India, Alex Norman found similar motives that brought western ‘spiritual tourists’ to Rishikesh, the most common being the concern for self-

represents, in my mind, a fruitful topic for further research on the correlation between imaginary and corporeal travel.

²⁵ See Graham Dann, ‘Anomie, Ego-Enhancement and Tourism,’ *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 4, no. 4 (1977), pp. 184-194.

improvement and healing, thanksgiving, coming to the source or origin of spiritual traditions, and intensive learning and practice. Similar to my findings and Giddens' notion that in late modernity selfhood becomes a reflexive project, Norman observed how these motives revolved around what he calls "the explicit project of the self."²⁶

Janine, a thirty-three year old Melbourne native whom I met at a café in Pokhara explained what brought her on her six month trip through India and Nepal. Along with trekking in the Himalayas and taking a break from her "busy life and boring job," she said:

I've been practicing yoga for about ten years now, and in the past few years I've gotten into meditation – mainly Vipassana. I've read a lot of books like the ones by the Dalai Lama, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, stuff like that. I guess after all this reading and practicing at home, I wanted to come here to see for myself, to see where all these brilliant teachings come from. And I think it's easier to immerse yourself and live the teachings here, cause you have the time and the culture is more spiritually oriented. I mean, this is where it all comes from, this is their culture, it's part of daily life, not something you just go dip into. There is so much history and wisdom here. I mean, I went to the exact place where Gautama Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree and attained enlightenment. There were few people around cause it was after the pilgrim season. I sat under the very tree, I meditated right there. I cannot even describe how powerful that experience was. It was incredible! I keep thinking about that day in Bodhi Gaya. I think it was a pivotal experience in my life. So, I think it was important for me to come, if anything for that one experience of sitting under the Bodhi tree. I guess it's about coming to the source and experiencing that pure connection.

In Janine's case, along with Avery and other travellers, visiting the source and connecting with the history and practice of the spiritual traditions they identified with takes on great significance and exemplifies Victor Turner's notion of pilgrimage as "a journey to the center out there."²⁷ In the case of spiritual journeys by westerners through India and Nepal, however, we observe that the 'centre' is not located within or commonly shared by members of one's home society. Rather, these centres are really and truly 'out there,' located in

²⁶ Alex Norman, *Spiritual Tourism: Travel and Religious Practice in Western Society* (London and New York: Continuum, 2011), pp. 32-46.

²⁷ Victor Turner, 'The Center out There: Pilgrim's Goal,' *History of Religions*, vol. 12, no. 3 (1973), pp. 191-230.

distant geographic and transnational contexts, becoming what Cohen calls “elective” spiritual centres.²⁸

Another case of an individual whose “elective” spiritual centre was located beyond the bounds of his own society was Kazu. A native of Tokyo, Kazu has made three trips to the Himalayas, spending the majority of his time in Dharamsala, the home of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile. He described the motivation for his first trip to India in 1999 as the desire to do a “hardcore backpacking trip,” to visit Buddhist sites, and attend teachings by the Dalai Lama. Like Jason, Avery, Janine, and other travellers I met, Kazu expressed how his first trip to India took place during a crossroads in his life: “Everything was getting fucked up. I had to escape. I had some friends who quit their jobs and went to India for like a year. I envied them.”

In India and Nepal, Kazu claimed to have made Buddhist pilgrimages to spiritual centres such as Bodhi Gaya and Lumbini, though he admitted that he felt he could never really integrate with the “spiritual community,” both foreign and domestic. He described himself as being “too rational” and that the people who prostrated themselves at temples acted “very irrationally.” Nonetheless, he expressed a certain utopian yearning that appeared to guide other travellers as well. When I asked why he kept returning to the Himalayan region, he replied tellingly: “I want to believe that some place sacred exists, that there is an ideal village out there.” Asking if he had managed to find that “ideal village,” he answered:

Not exactly. But people in the Himalayas live [a] very pure life, much more pure than Japan – there [it] is too modern, too fast, very busy, very distracting. There’s not enough connection – to the nature, not enough spiritual connection. People in the Himalaya live with the nature, not against it. They have time for spiritual matters. It’s more simple, more free.

Kazu, like other travellers, followed the pattern of comparing and critiquing his native society while praising the forms of life he encountered in the Himalayas, giving the impression once again that such journeys were driven by both ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors also related to life stages and lifestyle choices. When I asked Kazu why he chose to pursue Buddhism in India, as opposed to in his native Japan, his answer was related again to the concern with origins and purity:

Japanese Buddhism is not pure, not original Buddhism; it’s missing something fundamental, and [it’s] too political. India, Tibet, Nepal, this is where Buddhism comes from. The history is very important. You can feel the essence.

²⁸ Erik Cohen, ‘A Phenomenology of Tourist Experiences,’ *Sociology*, vol. 13, no. 2 (1979), pp. 179-201.

Like Janine and Avery, we can see that coming to the source of the spiritual tradition he identified with and perceived as “pure” was an important theme in Kazu’s journeys. Since his first trip in 1999, Kazu has been back twice and said in specific reference to Dharamsala, “I plan to visit again, and again! Dharamsala is a unique place, different from the rest of India ... softer.” As he explained, and as I observed, there is a community of travellers in Dharamsala centred on the figure of the Dalai Lama, a group Kazu jokingly called “Dalai Lama groupies.”

Cosmopolitan Pilgrims and *Communitas* in Dharamsala

I encountered Kazu’s “Dalai Lama groupies” on only my second day in Dharamsala, when word quickly spread among travellers in the small hill station that ‘His Holiness’ would be appearing at the main temple that afternoon. Ironically enough, I received this news from an old friend from the time I lived in Japan, named Reiki, whom I regrettably had not seen or had any contact with for six years, but happened to cross paths with on a steep, narrow street as I searched for someplace to eat breakfast. Travelling with his girlfriend, Haruka, both were passionate about the Dalai Lama’s teachings and had specifically come to Dharamsala to experience them first hand. From reading the Tibetan leader’s books, they had become deeply interested in Tibetan culture and religion and the political struggle against the Chinese occupation, and were even members of a Tibetan association in Japan.

With Reiki and Haruka, I found myself waiting for several hours at Dharamsala’s main temple with a high spirited, cosmopolitan mix of Tibetan monks and lay refugees, Indians from across the subcontinent, global pilgrims, tourists, and everyone in between. All around the temple complex, people were chatting and smiling, sharing snacks while waiting patiently for the Dalai Lama to appear. Giving an elderly Tibetan woman my seat, she smiled, taught me a few Tibetan words and offered me a couple of *momos* (steamed dumplings). Soon I noticed how a Swiss peace activist, an American artist, a Spanish traveller, and I, along with Reiki and Haruka, had formed organically into a group. I recall perceiving a marked sense of egolessness in this group and instead a warm, comfortable openness, as if everyone had always been friends and were free to let their guard down. Looking around, I noticed how similar cosmopolitan groups had sprung up all around the airy courtyard of the hillside temple, giving me the impression that I was witnessing what Turner calls spontaneous *communitas*, a sudden breakdown in normal communicative barriers and social structures and a sense of communal togetherness.²⁹ I

²⁹ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), p. 128.

reflected on how the nodal point of this sense of spontaneous cosmopolitan *communitas* was none other than the Dalai Lama himself, who indeed appeared to be a living, global pilgrimage centre. In the days to come, when I asked many people why they had come to Dharamsala, the main response was to see the Dalai Lama, to listen to his teachings, to learn about Tibetan religion and culture, and to meet Tibetan people.

Observing that experiencing corporeal co-presence with the Dalai Lama appeared to be a central aim of many travellers' journeys, I reflected on what ideals this global spiritual leader and self-described 'humble monk' symbolised for the travellers who came to Dharamsala. In the course of interviews with travellers during my month in Dharamsala, I found that the ideals that pulled them there were the very ones the Dalai Lama had been teaching over the course of his lifetime as the spiritual and political leader of Tibet and an iconic ambassador of world peace. Tibetan Buddhism, derived from the older Vajrayana and the foundational Mahayana traditions, centres foremost around the cultivation of 'loving kindness' (*mettābhāvanā*) and compassion (*chenrezig*). While based essentially on the same principles developed centuries and even millennia ago, these teachings continue to speak to contemporary Tibetan and global audiences alike.

Along with Buddhist ideals, many travellers I met responded deeply to what the struggles of the exiled Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people symbolised; namely, violations of human rights, the call for religious freedom and cultural autonomy, and respect for nature and human dignity. From my interviews and observations in Dharamsala, including participating in a volunteer project in which travellers teach English to Tibetan refugees, I had the impression that for the majority of travellers in Dharamsala, Tibet symbolised all that was 'good' and 'right' in the world on the one hand, and all that was 'wrong' on the other. Tibetans were perceived to be a peace-loving, spiritually-minded people who for centuries had lived in harmony with nature and each other high in the remote Himalayas. This utopic image corresponds to various popular representations of Tibet and Himalayan cultures, from early travel writings by European explorers and early mountaineers, to books such as *Lost Horizon* and films like *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Kundun*, and in the Dalai Lama's own books and other writings pertaining to Tibet.³⁰ Moreover, the situation of Tibet since the Chinese assault and occupation beginning in the

³⁰ Peter Bishop, 'The Death of Shangri-La: The Utopian Imagination and the Dialectics of Hope,' presented at *Psychology at the Threshold International Conference*, Santa Barbara, California, August 31 – September 4, 2000. See also Peter Bishop, *The Myth of Shangri-La: Tibet, Travel Writing and the Western Creation of Sacred Landscape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

late 1950s also symbolised for travellers all that was wrong with the world – violence and ethnocide, injustice and oppression, the mindless exploitation of the natural environment, and the decimation of an innocent, peace-loving people. Tibet is a place, but perhaps even more so it is a threatened utopian image charged with political, ethical, and spiritual meanings; an image in which the Dalai Lama serves as the deterritorialised nodal point. Touched by the message of the Tibetan people, a message that calls for greater compassion, loving-kindness, peace, and justice in the world, travellers come from around the world as global pilgrims to Dharamsala with the aim of strengthening and embodying these ideals, creating solidarity and support with the Tibetan people.

Voluntourism as Doing Good *and* Gaining Access

The utopian desire to realise a better world was an important theme in Dharamsala, exemplified by the numerous community volunteer projects and NGOs present. It seemed like every other traveller I met in Dharamsala was spending part of their time there and elsewhere in the region ‘getting involved’ and trying to ‘do some good.’ For instance, in Dharamsala I met Emily, a Toronto native in her mid-twenties. We struck up a conversation as she paced slowly around the main temple cradling a Tibetan baby in her arms. She explained how she was participating in a volunteer project organised by a Korean-established NGO called *Rogpa* (Tibetan for ‘trusted friends and helpers’), which offered free childcare to Tibetan refugee families. When I asked of her general impression of Dharamsala, her immediate reply was that it was “magical.” When I asked what she meant by this, she said:

You know, the Himalayas! It’s a dream to be here and it’s just so beautiful. And Dharamsala, it’s just got this ... energy! There are so many great community projects; seems like so many people trying to do good things; it fills me with ... hope.

Emily explained how her motives for making her trip were to practice yoga and meditation, go trekking, experience the Dalai Lama’s public teachings, learn more about the Tibetan cause, and do volunteer work. Volunteering was important for Emily, who explained it as part of her yoga practice: “Serving others is one of eight aspects of yoga,” she told me, “stretching is only one.” As she swayed the Tibetan baby side to side, I learned that at home in Toronto she was studying to be a midwife. “So, you were just born to serve,” I said. “Yeah, I guess so. I think people are at their best when they are giving,” she replied. For Emily, volunteering and serving others in Dharamsala – a place charged with political overtones – was part of a set of ideals which appeared centred on a teleology of self-improvement and a contribution to the making of a better world. In this same group of volunteers, I met Gerard, a Frenchman

who was also meandering around the temple courtyard with a Tibetan baby cradled in his arms. While volunteering was not the sole purpose of Gerard's trip, which would combine trekking, a ten-day Vipassana meditation course in the mountains outside Dharamsala, and travels to other parts of India, Gerard explained:

Since I had the time, why not offer some help? Even though I had nothing to do with what happened to them [the Tibetan people], I feel they've had such a hard life, being refugees, losing their home and living in exile. They are amazing people. So, this is the least I can do. And it's hardly work, I mean, look at this cute bébé! Who is the lucky one here?

For the volunteers I met in Dharamsala, such as Emily, Gerard, and those whom I taught English with, their goals and ideals revolved around helping the Tibetan refugees, a people who many travellers imagined to simultaneously symbolise all that is good and evil in the world and who are signified by the enigmatic figure of the Dalai Lama. Coming to Dharamsala was a chance to learn about and experience Tibetan culture and spirituality, which has been under threat for the past sixty years since the Chinese occupation. In this sense, volunteering was not only about giving, but receiving as well, and hence we are reminded that the gift exchange is not a neutral practice. By offering their time and service, travellers came into intimate contact with Tibetans, a people who tend to be simultaneously idealised and pitied. Experiences of proximal intimacy and perceptions of meaningful encounters with Tibetans were significant motivating factors for many Himalayan travellers who, contra the 'tourist gaze,' were not interested in merely taking pictures.³¹ By 'getting involved' in local life through volunteer projects, travellers sought experiences that facilitated what ethnographers call 'gaining access,' a way of breaking through outsider-insider barriers and entering the lifeworlds of Others.³² While there were certainly altruistic motives in doing volunteer work, I came to see how the practice, perhaps also like ethnography, was often part of the more general aim of increasing one's own understanding of the world, and hence of oneself.

Searching for Self in Other Forms of Life

Along with pursuing spirituality in a place of origins and 'voluntouring,' part of what drove many Himalayan travellers was the basic desire to experience and understand other forms of life. Recall John, who listed his first reason for

³¹ John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0* (London: Sage Publications, 2011).

³² See Pekka Mustonen, 'Volunteer Tourism: Postmodern Pilgrimage?', *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2006), pp. 160-177.

going to Nepal as “[t]o experience as much of the Nepalese way of life (especially in the remote areas) as possible.” Similarly, Roman explained his motivation in terms of the desire for experiential learning and the satisfaction of curiosity:

I feel like we learn something when we land in a place like Nepal or Bhutan. I am not sure exactly what it is, but the hunger for this type of learning drives me to travel to these places and when I finally figure out exactly what it is I may no longer have that same hunger.

We should recall how Roman traced his “hunger” for adventures in “places like Nepal or Bhutan” to the stories his parents read to him as a child. Driven by a hunger for adventures in places perceived as frontier zones, Roman, Jason, and other Himalayan travellers carried out worldmaking exercises that blended childhood fantasies with corporeally encountered realities. Indeed, many travellers claimed that coming to the Himalayas had been a ‘dream’ of theirs. Carina, an actress from San Francisco, explained her inspiration for making a two month trip through Nepal, India, and Bhutan as “a dream come true,” and continued to explain:

I’ve always loved mountains. I am not sure I can explain exactly why I am drawn to the Himalayas. Perhaps it’s their exotic location, mystique and folklore. Perhaps because I lived in this part of the world in another life and am drawn back. Perhaps because these mountains are the tallest on the planet. I love immersing myself in places where there are very few Americans and drawn to the ‘National Geographic’ experience of it all. I love travelling off the beaten path and the diversity of seeing how other humans on the planet live. Now I am itching to travel again!

Carina’s speculative reasons parallel those of many other travellers I encountered, and appear deeply entrenched in the realm of the imaginary. First, there was the image and allure of a place perceived not only as “exotic” and different, but mystical and utopic. Such imaginings were very much in tune with popular media representations of the Himalayas, such as those found in *National Geographic* and, again, in films such as *Seven Years in Tibet*. Next, there was a passionate desire to experience the imagined grandeur, magnificence, and purity of the highest mountains on earth, or, as John put it, “[t]o exist in the lap of the mother of all mountain ranges.” This was part of the desire for challenge and adventure, for ‘travelling off the beaten track’ and crossing frontier zones with the promise of positive transformation. Fundamentally, what bound these pursuits together was the desire to experience Otherness, something of which was only previously imagined. For travellers such as Roman, Carina, John, and others, the crossing of thresholds, that separated the familiar from the alien, promised learning and growth by enlarging their awareness of worldly possibilities. Travelling, in this regard,

resembles a kind of explorative and experimental art form capable of generating, in the words of Judith Adler, a transformative worldmaking.³³

This leads back to my original question regarding why people travel. Why is reading *National Geographic*, practicing yoga, or going hiking *at home* not enough? John Urry identifies three basic forms of mobility – imaginative, virtual, and corporeal – all of which intersect and impinge upon one other on various levels. He asks the important question: “[g]iven the significance of imaginative and virtual travel within contemporary societies, why is there an increasing amount of physical, corporeal travel?”³⁴ The answer I arrived at in the course of my fieldwork is that imaginary and virtual travel are not enough for certain individuals. Urry observes how places “*must* be touched, seen, smelled, heard, physically walked in – in short, *sensed*, in the literal meaning of the word.”³⁵ Just as contemporary actors, despite being able to communicate across time and space via ICTs still require face-to-face encounters with significant others, or moments of what Urry calls “intermittent co-presence,” the need for face-to-place encounters also persists. The corporeal experience of ‘being there,’ of seeing the Himalayan region with their own eyes and walking through them on their own feet, were extremely important to the travellers I encountered.

Indeed, gaining new understandings by moving further from conventional certainties and exposing themselves to experiences of Othering was a central aim for many Himalayan travellers. Actively seeking what Karl Jaspers calls ‘limit situations,’ travellers commonly expressed this as a desire to “get out of [their] comfort zone.” Such desires centred on the awareness that the world was full of diverse possibilities and that by crossing boundaries and transcending limits, one could extend one’s horizons, and gain worldly wisdom and self knowledge. A twenty-four year old Swiss traveller named Katia, for instance, explained what a third trip to India would mean to her:

For my third trip in India, I expect to know myself even better than today. I also expect to know about life, people, society, values ... I look forward [to] seeing nice colours, true smiles, uncomfortable life (commodities) ... I like to get over my limit, and India is the country for that.

By going to India, a place *Lonely Planet* promises will “jostle your entire being,” Katia seeks to “get over” her perceived limitations by throwing herself into situations of radical difference. As quests for understanding, Katia and

³³ Judith Adler, ‘Travel as Performed Art,’ *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 94, no. 6 (1989), pp. 1366-1391.

³⁴ John Urry, ‘Mobility and Proximity,’ *Sociology*, vol. 36, no. 2 (2002), p. 256.

³⁵ Urry, ‘Mobility and Proximity,’ p. 262, emphasis in original.

other travellers in this sense relate to the German notion of *bildung*, usually translated as ‘self-formation.’ Gadamer characterises *bildung* as a quest for the universal, for recognising oneself in another being. He references Hegel, who wrote that “[t]o recognise one’s own in the alien, to become at home in it, is the basic movement of spirit, whose being consists only in returning to itself from what is other.”³⁶ Hegel found the world and languages of antiquity especially conducive to this type of learning, which involves a “separation of ourselves from ourselves.” As a kind of self-induced alienation,³⁷ this type of learning is aimed at cultivating an enlarged perception of oneself as a historically constituted subject. For Gadamer, it is the encounter and dialogue we carry out with the Other, be it text or foreign lifeworld, that expands our horizons. He writes: “Only through others do we gain true knowledge of ourselves.”³⁸ By crossing boundaries, facing perceived limits and seeking to understand the Other, travellers such as Katia were on quests driven by the philosophic imperative of ‘knowing thyself.’ Yet she and others were seeking othering experiences not in the disengaged mode of the *vita contempliva*, but through active, meaningful engagement with the Other. As Levinas writes, “[m]y relationship with the Other as neighbor gives meaning to my relations with all the others.”³⁹

As a German traveller whom I met wandering around a mossy Buddhist temple in Sikkim told me:

Travelling in India is all about challenging assumptions. You come here to realise that your common sense is not so common. It puts things into perspective, all things we take for granted at home.

Alfred, a twenty-three year old Belgian traveller I met at another temple perched high above Yuksom village in Sikkim, had a similar desire for challenging his assumptions, crossing perceived limits and generating self-knowledge by knowing the Other. He spoke passionately about his quest for understanding while travelling on foot through north-eastern India and Nepal, explaining that his goal was wanting “to find out how I really am.” Continuing, he said:

It’s so powerful here! In Europe, there’s no way you can get what you get here. The nature, the spirituality... Over there, you’re always

³⁶ Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 12-13.

³⁷ This should be understood as alienation not in the Marxian sense of alienated labour, but in the Hegelian sense of *entfremdung*, literally, ‘estrangement.’

³⁸ Hans Georg Gadamer, ‘The Problem of Historical Consciousness,’ in *Interpretive Social Science: A Second Look*, eds Paul Rabinow and W. M. Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 86.

³⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: Or, Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. 159.

busy, hanging out with friends, partying, working, going to school, there's always so much stuff happening. There's no way I could've learned the things I've learned about myself in Europe that I've learned here. Walking through the Himalayas these past three months, I really transcended what I thought were my limitations.

Along with the type of learning (and un-learning) which comes from placing oneself in foreign environments, self-testing and exploring the limits of the body in the extreme natural environment of the Himalayas was an important aim for Alfred and the many travellers I encountered.

Nature-Challenge Activities and Embodied Self-Overcoming

Pilgrimage research influenced by the 'mobilities turn' has come to privilege the process of journeying over the reaching of final destinations.⁴⁰ In my research, I too found that Himalayan journeys were largely movement-centred and processual, but that reaching specific destinations and achieving concrete goals were also highly significant. This was especially so regarding the making of certain, often famous route-based mountain treks. Waiting to clear customs at Kathmandu airport, I met a middle-aged couple from California who were bubbling with excitement in anticipation of making the famous Mount Everest base-camp trek in the Khumbu region of north-eastern Nepal. I asked the couple if they did much hiking in the Sierra Nevada mountain range of California and they replied "not at all." I found it interesting that despite living within a couple hours of what many consider a very spectacular mountain range, they chose to fly halfway around the world to make this particular trek. They explained how they attempted the base-camp trek eleven years earlier, but that the wife had succumbed to altitude sickness and were forced to turn back. Outfitted in high-tech trekking apparel, they explained: "We've always wanted to come back and make it to base camp. If anything to tell ourselves that we can still do it." We can see here that having a physical challenge, an achievable goal, and a specific destination were significant for these travellers and that the meaning was not only in the journey itself.

A similar case was that of a traveller from New Zealand, who despite having a very common English name, perhaps not insignificantly, suggested that I call him Don Pablo. Explaining his basic motivation for making a six-week trip to Nepal as the desire "to have an adventure," he went on to claim that his three-week trek to Mount Everest base-camp was "the best thing I've done in my life." Don Pablo made the journey with two close friends in a

⁴⁰ See Simon Coleman and John Eade, 'Introduction: Reframing Pilgrimage,' in *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion*, eds Simon Coleman and John Eade (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 1-25.

period just before entering a doctoral program in psychology. He saw doing a PhD as a great challenge, but figured that if he could successfully complete the long trek to the highest mountain on earth, he could manage doing a doctorate. Emphasising how much he enjoyed the solitude and simplicity of mountain life and seeing how the Sherpa live “in harmony in such a dramatic environment,” Don Pablo also highlighted the importance of having “a definitive goal that drives you forward”:

... You also feel you're on a mission to accomplish something worthwhile and life-changing. It's not just simplifying life and slowing down. You could do that by being unemployed and being on the benefit. But then you would have no goal, no sense of achieving anything, and these are things I think humans need to feel as if they are flourishing and to make them happy. And I know I for one would feel guilty that I was wasting my time and my life. So it's simplifying, slowing down, with an important goal and a sense you're doing something worthwhile.

Having a “definitive goal” and “a mission to accomplish” were important components of what made mountain treks “worthwhile” and “life-changing” for Don Pablo and others, and these often took on allegorical significance after their completion. Not only did successfully reaching Everest base-camp instil a confidence in Don Pablo for successfully completing a PhD, he explained how several years later he continues to revisit the experience:

Whenever I feel life is getting overbearing with its stressors – all the things I have to do, I feel a sudden urge to escape and go hiking in the mountains again. Further, when I look at my pictures of my trek in the Himalayas it make me feel relaxed, and happy.

Similar to Frazer's ‘law of contagion’ – the idea that things in contact continue to act upon one another – Don Pablo's re-imagined Himalayan journey continues to maintain a positive presence in his life. In her research on the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage, Nancy Frey found that for many pilgrims, the experience lives on and often takes on new meanings well after the journeys are made.⁴¹ Contrary to the idea that ‘the longer the journey the more meaningful it is,’ Frey found that “what appears to be more important is what the pilgrims bring to the Camino (state of mind, motivation) and how the Camino is remembered and acted on in the post-experience.”⁴² Similarly, Robert, a San Franciscan who has been leading groups to the Himalayan region annually for the past twenty-five years, told me how “it takes about three to

⁴¹ Nancy Frey, *Pilgrim Stories: On and Off the Road to Santiago* (London: University of California Press, 1998).

⁴² Frey, *Pilgrim Stories*, p. 214.

four months after returning home that the experience begins to sink in and make sense.”

Along with trips to pilgrimage centres, such as Varanasi, Bodh Gaya, and Gongi Tori in India, Robert’s itineraries often included the Mount Everest base-camp trek and occasionally other treks in the Annapurna range, in Sikkim or Ladakh in northern India. Explaining where trekking fits into his guided trips, he explained:

My trips combine visiting religious sites and staying in ashrams, doing yoga and meditation, and also plenty of opportunities for getting to know the locals. We do these treks to bring the element of nature into the mix. But not just any nature! Trekking in the Himalayas pushes people to their absolute limits – both physically and psychologically. In fact, these bifurcations break down up there, which in a way is the whole point. It leads to spiritual growth and compliments the other aspects of the experience. No one comes back quite who they were before from these trips.

Not only Robert’s travellers, but most people I met at some point of their journeys, planned on engaging in what Lee Davidson and Robert Stebbins call “nature challenge activities,” leisure pursuits whose “core activities center on meeting a natural test posed by one or more of the six elements.”⁴³ In her research on secular pilgrims and spiritual tourists in the Indian Himalayas, Salani Singh describes such seekers as “environmental pilgrims.” Motivated by *geopieté*, a spiritual reverence for the earth, contemporary “environmental pilgrims” are driven to places such as the middle Himalayas by “the search for and appreciation of intrinsic environmental and cultural values in pristine environments.”⁴⁴

The majority of travellers I encountered, as in Singh’s research, were mainly middle-class, university educated, and from metropolitan areas in the western world. From a historical sociological perspective, the contemporary value and enthusiasm for nature and “nature challenge activities” is more a product of the great transformations of modernity and romantic aesthetics than of nature having an “intrinsic” value in itself.⁴⁵ Turning his recent gaze to moral and ethical aspects of tourism, Dean MacCannell observes that “nature provides humanity with a moral mirror [that] is crucial to ecotourism, sustainable tourism,” and that “so-called new tourists are fascinated by the

⁴³ Lee Davidson and Robert A. Stebbins, *Serious Leisure and Nature: Sustainable Consumption in the Outdoors* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 2.

⁴⁴ Salani Singh, ‘Secular Pilgrimages and Sacred Tourism in the Indian Himalayas,’ *GeoJournal*, vol. 64, no. 3 (2005), p. 222.

⁴⁵ See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

society/nature division, across which they project strong moral values.”⁴⁶ Many Himalayan travellers I encountered described their urban lives at home as fast-paced and stressful, and expressed deep desires to spend time outdoors in natural environments, and to engage their bodies in physical challenges. Anna, a twenty-eight year old British woman I met at a guesthouse in Kathmandu, for instance, had quit her job as a financial planner in London and explained her reasons for coming to the Himalayas in these terms:

I came to trek mainly, and to do yoga. I guess I came to move my body. I had to get out of London. I felt stifled and perpetually stressed, so I decided to break out of that cycle and here I am. Being up in the mountains has been amazing. It is such a different way of life. You can't call it easy, but it's certainly healthy!

The significance of trekking, spending time outdoors, and practicing yoga was qualified by Anna in her description of her urban lifestyle at home in London. Since graduating from university, she had worked in a bank, a job that kept her indoors and “perpetually stressed.” In order to counter the effects of this lifestyle, Anna had committed herself to practicing yoga and on weekends tried to spend as much time as possible outdoors, making excursions to the countryside to go hiking with friends. I met many similar cases of people who lived in cities and worked in offices, where they spent exorbitant amounts of time seated in front of computers while longing for fresh air and bodily movement. A number of participants expressed great disdain for the institutions in which they worked, which were frequently described as boring, bureaucratic, egocentric, and alienating. Many of these individuals saw their trips to the Himalayas, like Anna, as a ‘breaking out’ of or, at least, a temporary escape from what was often described as overly sedentary, stressful, and unfulfilling lives at home.

Mike, another Londoner also in his late twenties, whom I met in Pokhara shortly after he had completed the seventeen day Annapurna circuit trek, explained how he had been working for a government ministry until 2010. In the wake of the 2008 global economic crisis, Mike said things became “very ugly, very political” in his place of work and there was “a lot of backstabbing going on by people scared of losing their jobs.” Many of his friends had lost their jobs or else taken substantial pay cuts, “so it was a good time to get out.” With a small severance package and his life savings, he decided to leave London on an open-ended trip, beginning in Nepal, “a place I had always dreamed of coming.”

⁴⁶ Dean MacCannell, *The Ethics of Sightseeing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), p. 216.

When we met, Mike was one month into his trip, with three of these weeks spent on the Annapurna circuit trail. Like Don Pablo on trekking to Everest base-camp, Mike described the experience as the best thing he had ever done in his life. He spoke passionately about the mountain vistas, the physical challenge of trekking in high altitude, and the bonds he formed with fellow trekkers, some of whom he had been reconnecting with back down in Pokhara. He explained how it was easy to make friends and talk to people, as “everyone was going through a similar experience and shared the common goal – to make it over the pass.” At 5,300 meters, making it over ‘the pass’ is both the goal and greatest challenge of the trek, and trekkers follow a ritual of watching the sunrise from it. Explaining how many people do not make it over due to the high altitude and sudden weather changes, Mike described it as “by far the most difficult physical feat I’ve ever done in my life, and I’m a competitive cyclist.” A Swedish couple he befriended on the trail had apparently tried three times and never made it over ‘the pass’ and he also reported crossing paths with a Dutch woman with a broken leg who was being brought down by a mule.

Mike’s mountain adventure demonstrated many of the qualities of a rite of passage and pilgrimage, including liminality, *communitas* with fellow trekkers, and the completion of a circular journey that involved reaching and carrying out a ritual at a specific axis point. Back down in Pokhara, Mike expressed feeling a sense of change and transformation: “I feel the healthiest I’ve ever felt, fit as a whistle, really calmed down and just at peace with things. I just feel ... good.” As we chatted through a lazy morning at a café in Pokhara, Mike with an Umberto Eco novel in hand, I reflected on how the desire for challenging bodily experiences in the mountains appeared directly related to people’s life situations at home. In Mike’s, Anna’s, and other cases, the pressures, boredom, and the neglect of the body that accompany urban lifestyles facilitated intense urges to reinvigorate their bodily being and reconnect to nature.

Conclusion

In this paper, I sought to discover the reasons why certain contemporary individuals from highly developed countries set off on journeys to the middle Himalayan region, while exploring the broader question of why people travel at all. From interviews, I found that pre-travel imaginaries informed by various media representations shaped travellers’ perceptions and expectations of the Himalayas, and fuelled desires for transformative adventures. The three central motives I identified in Himalayan travel were coming to the source or origin of spiritual traditions, exotic and authentic cultural experiences, and nature-based

challenges in the form of route-based mountain treks. There was almost always overlap between these themes and very often Himalayan journeys were incorporated into trips to other parts of Asia and in many cases around the world. Moreover, many travellers were found to be in transitional phases – between jobs and career paths, romantic relationships and life stages, and their motives hinged on a host of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors. Himalayan journeys were used variously to create distance from the everyday, to mark transitions into new life stages, to break out of unhealthy and dissatisfying patterns, to seek understanding of self and world and find re-envisioned life paths. Overcoming perceived limitations, enlarging understandings by experiences of radical Otherness and exploring bodily potentials, travellers sought to extend their horizons. My understanding of the *telos*, or ultimate aim of contemporary Himalayan travel, was thus of self-transformation, fulfilment, and the cultivation of *eudemonia*, human flourishing.

While Himalayan adventures lead in some ways to what Georg Simmel calls a “dropping out of the continuity of life,”⁴⁷ being betwixt and between, I have tried to emphasise here that travelling still takes place *within* the overall continuity of life. As a series of *experiences* within *experience*, clear delineations of when journeys actually begin and end are problematic. When one corporeally departs on a journey, there is a *sense* of a beginning, and when one corporeally returns, the *sense* of an ending. Yet places are visited, prepared for, and *known* in the imagination before they are departed for, and they are also re-visited and re-presented in the imagination after they are returned from. Sometimes travel imaginaries can be traced back to childhood, as in the cases of Jason and Roman, or even to imagined past lives, as in Carina’s case. The stories, images, and media representations we are exposed to in social experience work to construct worlds that build upon worlds in an ongoing creative process. In this sense, like the supposed boundaries separating here and there, self and Other, art and life, how do we know where our imagination ends and reality begins?

⁴⁷ Georg Simmel, ‘The Adventure,’ in *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, eds David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London: Sage, 1997), p. 222.