

## **Time at High Altitude: Experiencing Time on the Roof of the World**

*Manuel Schneider*

### **Abstract**

*This experiential report explores the complexity of time(s) in the context of high-altitude climbing. It shows the tight interdependence of time and place for the shifting relationship between pace, movement and altitude. It considers the centrality of Kairos, the fortuitous (and fortunate) convergence of the right person, at the right time, in the right place. Finally, it discusses the climber's constantly shifting relationship to the past, present and future while ascending, arriving at the summit and descending some of the highest (8,000+ meter) mountains of the earth.*

### **Introduction**

Each location has its own time. In a shopping mall or on the daily trip to work we move at another pace (usually faster) from a Sunday walk in the woods; and the time spent at a library surrounded by books is perceived differently from the time in the office sitting in front of a computer screen. Time spent in a city away from nature cannot be equated with time spent in the country. This interconnectedness of location and time is a well-known phenomenon. Less known is the fact that the *altitude* of a location dictates its time. As a rule, for most 'flatlanders', altitude never becomes a problem. If there is an incline, you simply step on the accelerator or take a ski lift. Mountaineers - and especially high altitude climbers who regularly penetrate into the zone of thin air - have different experiences. They - and I count myself among them - will be the topic of this report. I will discuss experiences of time and place at high altitude that I have made over the past years during various expeditions to some of the 8,000-meter-peaks of the Himalayas and Karakorum Mountains of Tibet and Pakistan such as Cho Oyu (with its 8,201 meters the earth's sixth-highest mountain), Shisha Pangma (at 8,046 meters the highest mountain on Tibetan soil) and the 8,047 meter high Broad Peak of the Karakorum mountain range.

### **Life in Slow Motion**

Up there, on what is commonly called the 'roof of the world', much looks different from the "basement" where 'flatlanders' normally spend their time. Everyone who has ever been at high altitude experiences the sensation of life in slow motion. The higher you get, the slower you become. And with the slowing down of your progress, the "more imposing" and "higher" the mountain seems to become. This is not only due to mountain climbing being exhausting and tiring per se, but above all to the oxygen content of the air (to be exact: the pressure of oxygen particles) decreasing with each meter of upward motion. As a rule, when climbing 8,000-meter peaks, the base camp is located at 5,000 meters (which is higher than the summit of Mont Blanc). At this altitude, the climber has to make do with only half of the normal

oxygen content. By 8,000 meters, the share of oxygen decreases to 30%, a third of what is available for breathing at sea level.

At that high altitude, moreover, it tends to be very stormy and yet, the smallest movement or exertion leads to panting and hyperventilation. Much wind but little air: this is the paradoxical situation climbers face on 'the roof of the world'. Small wonder, therefore, that all movement in the 8,000-meter-range is reduced to "slow motion" - at least when (as we always did on our expeditions) - no artificial oxygen is utilized. As the oxygen content is reduced near the summit, several intakes of breath are required before the next step can be taken. Breaks of four or more breaths separate one step from the next. Thus it is practically impossible to do more than 100 altitude meters per hour. In every respect, high altitude climbing is a 'borderline' experience, especially with regard to the "speed" of movement. Many an 8,000-meter-peak has been reached literally by crawling on all fours, rather than on two feet. No one is seen moving at the brisk pace of daily activities at ground level. The imperatives of speed we normally ascribe to with alacrity, have no application at these high altitudes. On the contrary: everything tends towards slowing down, standing still. 'The roof of the world' is a place where walking slowly grinds to a halt.

### **Finding the Right Measure of Time**

Up there, patience is of the essence. The mountaineer needs - literally as well as figuratively - a "long breath", i.e. staying power. He has to be able to wait - often for days and weeks - above all for decent weather. And when the weather finally improves, he has to wait until the consequences of bad weather (mostly the tons of new snow) no longer pose any danger. Unfortunately, the end of acute risk of avalanches often coincides with the end of good weather, which leads to a renewed period of hibernation at base camp. Everything considered, there are usually around six weeks available to play this punishing game: six weeks to overcome eight kilometers of altitude (not counting the weeks and months of preparation). Expeditions are marked by an unwanted surplus of time, an excess many climbers do not know how to deal with, which often leads to expedition participants experiencing impatience or "camp fever". Climbers who cannot wait, will not get far: the ones that are too fast tend to be 'punished' - and often the 'punishment' is death. The biblical quote for high altitude climbers could be paraphrased as: "The patient will inherit the realm of the summit".

When dealing with high altitude, it is not only necessary to wait for the right conditions of weather and mountain, but above all, to *wait for oneself*. This is the crux of the matter, the key to success and the reason for many, often deadly, accidents. At these high altitudes, the body of flatlanders needs one thing above all others: time. It has to slowly convert its whole metabolism to an oxygen-poor environment, "adjust" or "acclimatize" to the altitude: the slower, the better (all within the six-week limit, of course). On average, ten days are required to reach base camp at 5,000 meters. For some people, this is still way too fast. The consequence is what is called "High Altitude Sickness", which starts harmlessly with headaches and loss of appetite. If this is ignored and further upward progress attempted, it will

quickly become life threatening. The experience made during this process of altitude adjustment is paradox. Although the body has accommodated the necessary changes up to a certain altitude, it now needs time for all the internal processes catch up with each other.

At the same time, of course, moving too slowly at such great heights poses its own dangers. Above 5,300 meters of altitude, the body cannot totally regenerate, its strength atrophies slowly, continually and often imperceptibly. There are no habitations on earth where people *constantly* (i. e. for weeks and months) live above 5,300 meters, not even in the Andes, the Himalayas or in Tibet. Therefore, a base camp where an expedition will stay for four or more weeks must not be above 5,300 meters. This is the (human) border line. A second threshold lies approximately 2,000 meters higher. No matter how adequate altitude adjustment has been, time spent above 7,300 meters should not exceed several days (and sometimes hours). This zone is dramatically but correctly called "the death-zone". It is called the zone of death because from here on up the body continually and rapidly degenerates, even though the climber is resting, keeping warm and taking in enough food and fluids. Even under the best possible conditions, a climber's excellent physical state and adequate altitude adjustment, a stay of several days above 7,000 meters will inexorably lead to death. The time frame for ascending the summit, therefore, is very small indeed. The greatest skill of altitude climbing thus lies in finding the right balance between phases of tempered speed and appropriate periods of waiting. Finding the right measure of time and, more importantly, the correct moment for heading for the summit, is as decisive as determining the correct route.

This is a balance every climber has to find for him/herself. At these high altitudes, you find few communal times, seldom a mutual rhythm for going up or down. The higher you get, the more lonely you become. Here, the term "individual time" (german: "Eigenzeit") takes on an entirely new meaning. The route up becomes an inward journey. The climber will be confronted with the confusing experience that his perceptual horizon is more likely to *decrease* than increase. Although the vistas on the roof of the world are no longer obscured by any obstacles, your personal horizon of experience becomes ever tighter, more limited and more closed in. Spatial experience is reduced to your immediate goal: the few meters ahead, the next one or two steps. This means that the slow-down of movement does not lead to the customary increase in sensory perception and number of experiences normally encountered when speed decreases. On the contrary: instead of opening up and becoming more encompassing your relation to the world contracts and with every slowing down and increase in altitude you move ever deeper to the furthest recesses of your being. Your tracks in the snow, racing pulse, shallow, fast breath, steady rhythm of walking, increasing fatigue: all these embodied signs of your being become more real than the mountain environment whose breath-taking beauty is often perceived retrospectively only, back home looking at the photographs.

## **Experiencing Kairos**

The goal of every expedition has been and always will be the summit. Missing out on the highest point, even if it is only by a few meters, will be a bitter disappointment for all climbers alike. The sober statement "all in vain" can never be masked by the encouraging Taoist wisdom favored by climbers everywhere ("the way is the goal").

If, however, you are able to reach the summit of an 8,000-meter-peak, this marks the culmination of an expedition's extent of time. A circle of time spanning months, beginning with the planning of the climb and daily fitness training and ending with the successful return of the climber. The summit is the fulfillment of all yearning and effort; a fulfillment that has been decidedly 'iffy'. Usually, only a few members of an expedition reach the summit. It is not rare for no one to reach the goal. Statistically, only every third expedition is successful. Too many odds have to be overcome, too many pieces of the puzzle have to fit together: the weather, conditions on the mountain, the climbers' health and fitness, mental strength, and team spirit: the right person, at the right time, has to be at the right place. Reaching the summit, therefore, constitutes special experiences of "*Kairos*" of just the right moment and of harmony between person and environment.

Despite all efforts, despite all physical and mental performances, these high peaks cannot be "forced" and certainly not "conquered". It is more the case of the mountain briefly "allowing" or "tolerating" human presence where by right they should not be. The high mountains have always been and will continue to be infinitely superior to us. This knowledge is not only internalized during failure, but also - and perhaps most - during a successful climb. Scaling the highest peaks is possible only when everything "fits" and "falls into place" and will be experienced as a "fortunate" endeavor. This experience reaches special intensity if the summit is reached alone and you have been left to your own ingenuity- as I was privileged to do on two expeditions to 8,000-meter peaks. Sporadic radio contact with the base camp constitutes the only connection to society; conversations with little to say to those others "down there" even though you have lived through a lot and are experiencing emotional turmoil. At such moments you are your own and only neighbor: alone, and yet not lonely as you are in constant dialog with yourself and the mountain.

## **Losing the Future**

The summit is the place where all lines of the mountain, all its ridges and walls converge. Simultaneously it is the place to which all efforts, desires and hopes are directed and also converge. Reaching this - also emotionally - highest point radically changes all direction. The summit is the decisive point of an expedition's return, not only spatially, but also in time. Past, present and future change: during the ascent the present was always filled with future, with the expectation of reaching the summit. Only by constantly reminding myself of this future and by mentally anticipating the last steps towards the summit, can I muster enough strength for my intentions: of moving through the deep snow, leaning into the wind, erecting a tent

during a storm, melting snow for a cup of tea. The here and now lives off the 'once I am up there'.

Reaching the summit abruptly turns all this into the past. By fulfilling the expectation, there is no more future for the present; it is filled with things past. And when I turn my back upon the summit after a short rest in order to return to the base camp, I leave behind an "empty", albeit fulfilled future. Everything that motivated me and gave me strength for the ascent has been done - and yet, I could not be further from my goal. Soberly considered, the summit is the place where I am the *furthest removed* from the others and the security of the base camp. There is no comparison to the finish line of a marathon. In mountain climbing, climax and finish are two concepts as far removed from each other as possible. There is no doubt that the summit is the climax of a climb. However, its real goal must be a safe return. This conceptual "chasm" often poses a problem of motivation, exacerbated by being alone and beyond mutual assistance. How to summon the strength for a two-day descent after the event, for trudging down the same distance while being tired and exhausted? There are several stories of mountaineers who reached the summit (after ascending on their own) by drawing on their last reserves and then just stayed up there. They were not only had they exhausted their reservoir of physical strength, they were also mentally incapable of planning any of the necessary further actions for the (immediate) future. On the peak, they lived in the present, a *fulfilled* present - and I suppose for them, death was very peaceful.

### **You are Never Really Up There**

Everyone who reaches these highest points of the world, step-by-step gets closer to this existential frontier. Even if this boundary is not breached, reaching the summit is supposed to "make up" for all the hardship. Yet, exhilaration and relief are coupled not only with anxiety about the long and often dangerous descent (when most of the accidents occur), but also a feeling of emptiness and mourning. Mourning for a dream you have just lost - lost by it being fulfilled. Only slowly this emptiness begins to fill with new plans. And with every step down towards the valley and towards human civilization, you get an inkling that, after all, the summit you just scaled is only a *pre-summit* to your next one.

You are never really up there.