

Climbing the Ama Dablam Pyramid

by

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Since my expedition team's arrival at the village of Namche Bazaar, nobody could escape the foreboding presence of Ama Dablam, the impressive rock rising before us like an erect thumb. Now from a new angle of the Base Camp at altitude 4,600 meters it seemed to me that the mountain was forming a perfect triangular pyramid. Ama Dablam is one of the most astounding peaks on earth. Every waking thought was obsessed with this mountain, every dream a new adventure on its flanks. And now wherever I looked, wherever I turned she was there, defiant and indignant.

In Base Camp my teammates and I had the opportunity to get some training into some climbing techniques and procedures given by Tim Rippel (our expedition leader) and his assistants, Mirek and Clayton. For the second time in my entire life I had to use ropes, carabiners, harnesses, anchors etc. Therefore, I felt the need to learn everything from the beginning with Tim's help.

Tim Rippel chose a climbing rock just above our camp. First he examined it carefully from all sides and then selected a route to be followed. Once the route was decided, we tied the rope and started climbing. While I was testing every hold before using it, I was reminded again and again to do the three point climbing. Of my two hands and two feet, three should work together at a time for any movement. Either two hands and one foot or one hand and two feet should be firm on the rock. Only then the fourth should be moved for the next holds and so on, so forth. That rock climbing technique enables one to use smaller holds, too.

While climbing, one's movement should be rhythmic, poised and relaxed to conserve energy. Balance should be maintained properly by not using the arms too much, which was something I almost did constantly at the beginning. I was taught to try to keep hands below shoulder level so that the supply of blood to the arms and hands would not be reduced. I learned from the very beginning that it was a wrong practice and habit to climb more on hands. Just move smoothly, without jerks on feet.

I found out that hands should be used for keeping balance only. I should always stand upright, keeping the weight of the body on the feet. I kept the hands fairly low and avoided stretching full length for high handholds. I used the smaller holds to maintain balance.

Although at the beginning I intended to lie down on the rock, I gradually learned to keep my body away from the surface of the rock. In this posture, I could see footholds and climbing became easier. Another mistake of mine

that Tim corrected involved the elbows or knees as holds. These being delicate parts were getting bruised on slipping. By doing so, the balance was titled and movement was restricted because hands and feet became free and to resume climbing again became more difficult.

I adopted a style where I moved slowly but steadily, planning a few moves ahead and resting on good holds at intervals to examine further holds and the route. I moved smoothly without jerks, planning footholds carefully. There should not be any blind move.

In addition, our team leader helped us have a thorough knowledge of knots. Tim and his trusted assistants reminded us consistently that a wrong knot could be dangerous and result in an accident. Also, we were constantly reminded: "do not untie the anchors until the whole party completes the climb".

Tim tried to transfer two types of philosophy during our training: first, to know how to be self-reliant when climbing. According to Tim, every member of our expedition cannot always be guaranteed someone will be around to help if the climber gets into trouble or if someone in trouble needs somebody else's help. Nevertheless, that's why every climber should be self-sufficient, and secondly, any climber in trouble should always be helped, even if we have to abandon our own climbing mission. This ought to be the first duty of every climber.

One should sacrifice one's interest for the welfare of another climber, who is in trouble or needs help.

The climb to Base Camp (4,600 meters), and then to Advanced Base Camp (5,200 meters) and Camp One (5,975 meters) required determination, a lot of fitness and good acclimatization. Along the route from Base Camp to Advanced Base Camp (ABC) and then to

Camp One I tried hard to show a lot of character, and that everything would go according to "Plan A" until the end of the expedition. The thin air surrounding the high altitude camps definitely slowed my reactions and caused a major struggle when I had to make decisions. When I began ascending the Ama Dablam three things mainly occupied my mind: determination, courage and humility. I believe that every high altitude climber must be very determined in order to get on a high technical peak. Without determination nothing demanding can be accomplished. And what good is determination if there is not courage to get you off the couch and trust yourself?

Humility is the necessary counter weight, the balance to determination and courage. Nature has an awesome power, and egocentric abandon can quickly become deadly. As always, my gear was packed the night before, and it was always a relief to hit the path after breakfast. Usually, walking one behind the other, because of the narrow rails between camps, the only sound to break the silence was our heavy breathing, and the hacking cough of reluctant lungs, and the crunch of the trekking boots on the loose spree.

Summiting Ama Dablam dominated continuously my thoughts as it towered over the left side of the valley presenting yet another precipitous face. The mountain was more imposing and as steep as any other big mountains and equally as intimidating. How can one mountain present so many different faces and so many different moods?

And here I was, ready to begin my first Himalayan climb, that near suicidal baptism of fire undertaken by my soul; Here I was with my undefined to limited climbing skills, likely to get me in serious trouble, but hopefully with enough determination, courage and ego inside me to save me from any wrong dangerous. All the words I had heard about the exploits of the great Himalayan climbers had fired my imagination to such a fever pitch of anticipation that had seriously been unknown to me. I could become a victim of these mountains, a shattered bloody relic of overweening ambition.

As usual, during my ascent days I was awake well before I needed to be, counting the minutes of sleep I was missing out. Just as I dropped off, it was again time to get-up, extricate myself from the sanctuary of my sleeping bag and fumble around in the dark putting on layers and my feet into my plastic inner boots.

During rest days at the Base Camp we were sitting around in light jackets soaking up the sun, reading or listening to music. The morning was the best time of day. Just as the sun was beginning to melt the frost on the outside of our tents, our Sherpa cook prepared tea for us to drink. Breakfast was usually the most reliable meal, some form of eggs and chapatti, along with porridge or, more surprisingly, rice pudding, something we were now getting used to.

We got pretty accustomed to the eccentricity of these meals. Each meal was interspersed with several two to four course meals rustled up by our cook-Sherpa. He was making far too much food including roast chicken and potatoes, pizza, Spam, tuna, Indian bread, cheese cake, sushi, baked beans, pop-corn and much more.

Unfortunately it was all mainly stodgy, laced with a huge amount of calories. I had heard of carbo-loading, which could sound ridiculous, but I didn't mind. There were no fresh fruit or vegetables either, except once or twice.

Washing was another challenge. On the left side of our camp there was a one man shower tent with a shower which was handpumped.

On the ground there were placed flat stones to keep away the mud. Taking a shower could be quite an ordeal in a chilly wash tent, with the wind whipping around outside. Yet, under those hard weather conditions every member of the team was brave enough to make it.

Usually, I was split up from the rest groups, since when it was becoming hard going I preferred to walk on my own pace. Lost in my myriad thoughts, tired and achy I was counting down the distance and the time concentrated on every step so as to not twist my ankles in my trekking boots. I knew that all long days had to end, and just as the night fell, I descended to Advanced

Base Camp (ABC), where I had to make a cup of tea, some soup and a bed space. I didn't need much to live and be happy, and these three things were heaven to me at that point.

One morning, as I marvelled at the immense face of Ama Dablam a huge ventricular cloud was formed above the summit.

Before my very eyes and in only a few minutes the cloud loomed hugely and spun with massive ferocity. The power of the jet stream was astounding as it pounded the top; there was nothing that could survive such an onslaught.

I left the zigzags of the approach path, and as the rocks began to take place into the slender ridge of the mountain a couple of jaggy hand holds had to be found to keep me ascending. I came to the foot of Camp One of the ridge. Up to now I had climbed in trekking boots and so I stopped here and donned my plastic boots. Although the ascending via fixed ropes was very easy going, the crevasses were obvious and only inches wide. I reached the top of Camp One (5,975 meters). Close to 6,000 meters now the going was breathless and extremely hard to continue, at least for me. My energy levels were rapidly depleted and a strong wind built-up, blowing up the slope straight into my face. I just wanted to get down but somehow the wind kept knocking me over. I felt very knackered ascending a few meters more above the mark of 5,975 meters; and I took extra care not to slip.

As if I needed reminding, Ama Dablam was now staring at me, straight in my face. For the first time I could feel the massiveness of what was there, all around me. Behind me the view was quite unexpected. Peaks not normally seen from that side of the valley began to appear as if I had gained height. Peak Freaks' tents combined with the tents of other expeditions in Camp One were pitched on various small broken granite snowed slabs with very sharp edges. That means sleeping on piles of rocks, and although our Sherpas did a valiant job trying to level out the areas under our tents, it was difficult to ignore the lumps digging into us as we tried to doze off. The initial plan was to share one of the Peak Freaks' tents, on camp one, with Mike and Aldus. Later, Aldus decided to move on to another available tent to be alone and therefore gave me and Mike more sleeping space.

Outside my tent Mark and Mike brewed up water from ice and handed us all hot mugs of a nutritious sipping. Later Mike cooked for me a mug of chicken soup. Kevin, Mark, Mike, Tim, Aldus, Clay, Mirek and I, were standing in the cold, joking and turning our attention from time to time to the Ama Dablam peak. I believe we were strong and ready to give our one hundred percent to attack next day's mission; Camp Two, and the following day the final push to the summit via Camp Three and then our descent to Base Camp.

Felt satiated, there was nothing to do at that time but watch the incredible sunset and peer down the precipice of the Southeast face, at the bottom of

which I could see the tiny dots of our tents at Base Camp. Nobody from my teammates seemed to be really suffering from altitude; the only explanation I could give was the good acclimatization program that was implemented by our team leader.

A bit later the news was not good at all. Dandi Sherpa called Tim on his radio telephone and told him that somebody had stolen our fuel, from our tents in Camp Two. That meant that when we would reach Camp Two next morning, we would not have to cook our food or sip hot nutritious drinks and keep our organism warm at this altitude.

Also the snow situation was up to the chest and it would make it very difficult and dangerous for the expedition to proceed since it was very soft.

Tim was completely blown away. He was very upset. I saw twice this tough but gentle guy kick off the snow and curse the thieves, wherever they were hiding the damn rats. I understood how he felt. It was strictly a principle of professionalism. I thought that perhaps he felt exposed to us. He had to take us up to the top. That was his job, and he had to fulfil that mission. I put my hand on his shoulder and told him not to be upset. He got the same response from the rest of the guys. We stayed there for almost half an hour chatting and wondering what would happen the next morning; and what would be next morning's final decision?

All night long I was almost awake. My adrenaline kept me alert. I was rolling all over every now and then, and I didn't know how to fight that restlessness. I was miserable and very uncomfortable. Of course, sleep at this altitude is an elusive thing, anyway. I often found myself waking up in the night, gasping for breath because of the thin air. At the same time a constant rumble of avalanches were ripping down the valleys made for uneasy slumber. I am told that they don't usually reach Camp One, but it is hard not to imagine one's tent being swept away in the dark.

The theft of our fuel did not mark the end of our misfortunes. Unfortunately we received some more bad news. Bad weather conditions did not ally our Sherpas efforts to open the route to Camp Three and then to the final destination, the Ama Dablam summit.

Also, according to Tim, the weather forecast did not look favourable for our expedition. Although I had mixed feelings, I deeply trusted my team leader because I felt that he was giving one hundred percent of himself for the safety and security of our group. He was looking after everybody, both on the physical and on the emotional level. A characteristic detail was that the kitchen boys at Base Camp always served us and then the team leader. Or when we were coming back from our high altitude climbing excursions they were first running with a cup of tea or warm juice to comfort us and then to him, according to his instructions. He and his whole check mechanism accommodated our every need with conscience.

Nevertheless, when Tim made the decision that we should abandon our summit efforts, I personally felt discouraged and upset.

Which factors influenced our expedition leader's decision to abort the remaining of the ascent? Strictly issues of safety, our tight schedule, bad management, or what? To me and to some of my teammates it was almost soul destructive our leader's decision to descend at that particular point. I thought that we should stay there and give it a try or maybe give it all we had. After all, climbing a summit you have to earn it, nobody is giving it to you for free. Although some of my teammates' bodies including mine were punished, I felt that we were all strong with high morale and ready to give the last try for a harder climb and the accomplishment of a higher individual achievement.

We did not need anybody's attempt to lift our spirits. We were ready to face the challenges and make our choices since we were perfectly acclimatized and capable of looking after ourselves and after each other. My God, at that point I felt that we were one body, one soul, one person with one goal to summit the Ama Dablam peak. All of us had enough of this heroic attitude and I as such. Upon Tim's decision to abandon the summit ascent, nobody tried to talk him out of it. In my opinion, we didn't protest because one way or the other we had faith in Tim's judgments, we did trust him.

After all, it was obvious that Tim had a bad feeling about the weather and mountain conditions. I think one or two members from our expedition team were not only disappointed but very upset as well; yet they did not complain. My experiences, from my personal and professional life, showed me that there was no need for us to fight over this issue. After all we didn't know the mountain or the particular details of the ascent, and perhaps Tim's decision was correct.

The day of October 15, 2006 was going to be a long day. Despite the accomplishment of the ascent from Advanced Base Camp to Camp One, I knew that from Camp One and up to the summit the technical difficulty and the conditions would be substantially harsher for me. I and my teammates knew that our Sherpa guides, Dandi and Nima, had a difficult time from Camp Two and further up to open the route and set-up the fixed ropes to the summit. The preparation for the final climb to the last two camps before the summit welcomed the expedition with heavy snow which was up to the climbers' chest.

Another thing that made the climb a "mission impossible" was that the snow was soft, especially on the steeper sections of the Southwest ridge of the mountain, and therefore it was very difficult to set-up the support aluminium bars on the route up to the summit. Our schedule was very tight, considering the surrounding conditions, and the last minute push would be time limited, which could result in an unplanned accident. In my opinion, at

that time, the preparation of that stage of the expedition was not well managed for what we were going to encounter.