

Sherpas and Skis

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S-s-h-h-h — the soft sibilant sound of running skis and a swish-h-h- of snow spraying sideways on a smooth turn as white glistening crystals and flat glinting naphthalene-like plates of snow lost their pure smooth virginity in the early morning. A crisp cold wind freezes tissues, chills the cheekbones, nips the ear lobes and eyes water as air whips at the lids and loose surrounding skin. The heart beats strongly as blood courses through the body feeding oxygen to muscles and tendons now working smoothly, absorbing shocks, turning tips, releasing heels and biting edges. Nerve endings at feet, ankles, knees and eyes transmit messages to the brain at high speed, then back again to produce the perfect co-ordination of mind and muscle that is the essence of efficient downhill skiing in mountains. The slope steepens, sharpened metal crunches and bites into hard ice — a rock protrudes, edges release, and a swift side-slip avoids the danger as the skier speeds on at thirty to forty miles per hour. At last the angle eases, there is a chance to look up and see the hills, as legs, still working smoothly, continue to transmit their important messages to skis and brain.

This is how skiing is anywhere and it was skiing also for my wife Eileen and me on the virgin snows of the Chola Khola glacier in the Khumbu Himalaya. With Sirdar Dawa Tenzing, Lakpa Thondup and Ang Norbu we had set up our glacier ski camp at approximately 5500m on the glacier. From that camp for the next few days we extended the experience of our sherpas on ski, but our first full day was the best. We were up and away from ski camp early, reaching the Chug-yuma La just after dawn. The sun soon warmed us but at first the snow was crisp and as Eileen and I had a first run, we experienced those thrilling nuances of skiing that I have tried to describe. At the pass we looked down into the Nimagawa and across to mountains dividing the Ngojumba or Upper Dudh Kosi from the Bhote Kosi. In the clear morning air Kariolung, Numbur and other peaks of the Rolwaling seemed but a stone's throw away and over in the NW, Gaurisanka, and Menlungtse dominated among the serration of peaks etching the azure blue sky at the Tibetan border. Condensation snow crystals sparkled and glistened on the surface of the glacier around us as spreading webs of light dispersed by ice and snow on the high ridges expanded into our domain. Above and beyond the ridges and peaks that flanked the northern side of the valley plumes of ice particles curtailed southwards from the summits of Everest, Nuptse and Lhotse. Amongst those majestic timeless hills it was not just the keen cold morning air that took our breath away.

Sherpas learn quickly from visual example which is essential teaching practice for skiing. Some verbal instructions, minimal and to the point were needed and this we managed with a mixture of basic English and a few words of Tibetan — the Sherpa language. Yawa (meaning right) Yumba (meaning left) were in constant use and a source of amusement to Eileen as she watched me

make turn after turn over the snow closely followed by Lakpa or Norbu. As our figures dwindled in size and went almost out of sight across the glacier the sounds of yawa — yumba — yawa — yumba, constant as a metronome, floated back to her. Soon the snow softened, slowing the skis a little which was good for Lakpa and Norbu. For several hours they ski'd, making rapid progress with basic swings and wide stance parallels. Then soon, with real assurance, they ski'd away for a mile or more across the glacier until almost out of sight.

This was also the day that our old friend Dawa Tenzing, proud that sherpas were learning to ski, came up to watch — but not for long. Eventually he could not resist the temptation and asked if he could have a try, and he did! He sat down unintentionally a few times but persevered for an hour or more and was then content to let Lakpa use the skis again. Good old Dawa. We had to take off our hats to a man who at 74 years of age had just taken his first ski lesson at almost 5600m! He was well satisfied with his efforts and was content not to try again either in the Chola Khola or later in the Ngojumba. Always he would say 'I want the young sherpas to learn to ski,' and it was clear that he was looking ahead to the future of his people.

Lakpa Thondup, with his strong social conscience developed whilst a scholar at Hillary's Khumjung school, often enthused saying 'This is a good thing for sherpa society. I must show our children how to ski when the snow comes to Khumjung in November.' With his words in mind, we hoped we could leave skis and sticks with Lakpa when we left Sola Khumbu, and this we did.

Postscript

In 1976 we taught our sherpas to ski when we travelled in Khumbu for six and a half weeks. Lakpa Thondup is the son of Changup who carried to Camp V with Tom McKinnon and me on Kangchenjunga in 1955. That same year, Ang Norbu was our youngest sherpa on the mountain and carried to Camp VI at 8200m. Dawa Tenzing of course was our Sirdar in 1955 and 21 years later in 1976 we were delighted to pay him as Sirdar again, though in fact he came along with us on our Khumbu travels as a very dear friend. I am sure that at the age of 74 it was his last six weeks as a Sirdar in the mountains and I know he was immensely pleased. For us, and the younger sherpas, it was a privilege to have him with us. Amongst the many highlights of that time in Khumbu, I am sure that Dawa would mostly remember us taking greetings and 'chang' to Tony Streater's 'Soldiers' at their Everest Base Camp, the audience he arranged for us with the Incarnate Lama of Thyangboche (Dawa was a very religious man), our meeting with Gunther Sturm following an ascent of Goumouktse, and of course his experience with the sherpas on skis above the Chug-yuma La on the Chola Khola glacier.