

Reinhold Messner: The Phenomenon

The Ascent of all Eight-thousanders by the Most Successful Mountain Climber of Our Day

Oswald Oelz

On Thursday, 16 October 1986, at 1.45pm, Reinhold Messner, together with Hans Kammerlander, reached the summit of *Lhotse* (8516m). He thus became the first man to have climbed the main summits of all 14 8000m mountains of the world. Not many years ago such a mountaineering feat was unimaginable. The first, agonizing, ascent of an 8000er—Annapurna (8091m), by Maurice Herzog and Louis Lachenal in 1950—was followed in the next decade by the conquest of all 14 summits, always by the easiest route. Until 1975 no mountaineer had climbed more than two of these mountains. In recent years, trips to 8000ers have become available commercially, and the number of those who have climbed more than one 8000er has become almost too large to be listed; yet in the history of mountaineering Messner's achievement stands out because of its highlights, and because of the special style of climbing developed by him. In fact Messner, with only a few exceptions, and in contrast to many imitators, never climbed standard routes by the standard techniques of the day, but either opened up difficult new routes, or climbed old routes in a new style. The essential impulse for modern mountaineering in the Himalaya comes from him.

Tragic Prologue in the Himalaya

Reinhold Messner was born on 17 September 1944. Since around 1970 he has been a free-lance author and mountaineer. In the late 1960s he was one of the leading climbers in the Alps, with milestones to his name such as the first ascent of the Central Pillar of the Heiligkreuzkofel (Eastern Dolomites), big winter climbs, and first solo ascents of, for example, the Philipp-Flamm route on the Civetta and the N face of the Droite. At that time these climbs represented the extreme limits in the Alps. In 1970 he transferred his style of climbing, characterized by elegance and speed, to the big ranges of the world. In the following years the Himalaya saw a repetition of what had happened 100 years earlier in the Alps: most of the high main summits had been reached, and now the aim was to climb them by the most difficult routes.

Messner's first Himalayan expedition, to the Rupal flank of *Nanga Parbat* (8125m), nearly 5000m high, was carried out in the old classical style, with fixed ropes and a series of camps. On the summit push Messner started off alone, followed later by his brother Günter. On the summit the brother, suffering badly from the altitude, found that he could not return by the route of ascent, and the two descended by the Diamir flank—known to them only from a postcard view. What happened then—Günter's death in an avalanche and his own barest survival (he lost nearly all his toes through frostbite)—has marked

Reinhold deeply. He tried to come to terms with the experience in a book full of serious accusations against the leader of the expedition. Lengthy litigation led to a publication stop for this book.

In 1972, as a member of a Tyrolean expedition, he explored and ascended the S face of *Manaslu* (8156m). As in all such expeditions, Messner was mostly in the lead, climbing Grade VI rock pitches at altitudes of over 6000m. This expedition was also overshadowed by tragedy: on the day when Messner reached the summit, solo, two fellow-climbers died in a blizzard. Messner himself only narrowly escaped from the storm. Further successes did not always come according to programme, and the search for new and difficult routes up the 8000ers failed on several occasions: in 1974 on the S face of *Makalu* (8485m), and on the same mountain in 1981 and the winter of 1986. Messner attempted *Lhotse* and also *Dhaulagiri* (8167m) twice without success, and *Cho Oyu* (8222m) once, in winter. The fact that Messner is able to turn back when there is serious risk of avalanche or when the weather is permanently unsettled is surely one of the reasons why he is still alive. He could also turn back whenever he felt physically or psychologically below form—or when a daughter was born to him.

The 'Impossible' becomes Fact: Everest without Oxygen

Feeling frustrated by the immobility and failure of the big Italian expedition (1975) to the S face of *Lhotse*, Messner, together with Peter Habeler, introduced alpine-style climbing to the Himalaya, when the two climbed *Hidden Peak* (*Gasherbrum I*, 8068m) by the NW face. Without prepared camps, fixed ropes or native porters, they climbed (so to speak) in one push from Base Camp to summit.

In mountaineering history, Messner's most important achievement will probably be the first ascent of *Mount Everest* (8848m) without supplementary oxygen, on 8 May 1978. Until then there was general acceptance of the dogma, dating from the 1930s, that survival at altitudes over 8500m was impossible without bottled oxygen. Before the ascent, leading physiologists had declared in public that the attempt would fail, or would, at the least, lead to severe brain damage. When, after their success, no significant intellectual impairment was discernible in the two climbers, leading scientific publications took the line that Messner's and Habeler's bodies were exceptionally well able to take up oxygen and use it economically, as in the case of world-class marathon runners. However, at the University Hospital in Zürich the author, together with the Research Institute in Magglingen and the Universities of Berne and Geneva, has carried out studies on Messner and Habeler, and also on four other mountaineers who have reached altitudes above 8500m without oxygen. In nearly all cases these tests indicated normal physiological conditions, comparable to those in athletes, in medium to good training, practising sports which require good staying power. Thus the secret of Messner's success as a mountaineer does not appear to lie in exceptional physical powers, but rather, next to shrewd appraisal of the situation, in his motivation and in his capacity for endurance and suffering, which allows him to overcome barriers that on the whole are psychological rather than physiological.

Extreme Solo Climbs

Whilst his rivals, and the public which takes an interest in such things, were still busy coming to terms with Messner's Everest climb, news came of his next ploy: after several attempts, characterized by hesitation and early retreat, he climbed Nanga Parbat again in summer 1978—and this time by a new and dangerous route, and quite alone. The speed of his ascent and descent, on a route which, in Stefan Wörner's judgment, was extremely dangerous, was once again characteristic of his style of climbing. The ascent of *K2* (8611m) in 1979 was followed in 1980 by the first solo climb of Everest—a further high point in Messner's career, reached in utter solitude, which, more than anything before, brought him up against his own limits.

In 1981 he climbed *Shishapangma* (8048m) in alpine style, and this was followed in 1982 by one of the biggest walls of the Himalaya, the NW face of *Kangchenjunga* (8598m), with Friedl Mutschlechner and Sherpa Ang Dorje. Soon after, barely recovered from a lung embolism (and not, as generally assumed, from an amoebic infection), there followed *Gasherbrum II* (8035m) and *Broad Peak* (8048m) in alpine style—altogether three 8000ers within a few weeks. In the winter of 1982, with a colourful expedition, Messner attempted the S face of *Cho Oyu* (8222m), but the risk of avalanche forced him to retreat 500m below the summit. A few months later he reached the top, by a partially new route. And in 1984, having waited in vain for favourable weather to climb *Dhaulagiri*, he gave another demonstration of unbroken powers when, together with Hans Kammerlander, his partner of the last few years who has served as an ideal complement, he was the first to traverse two 8000er summits, *Gasherbrum I* and *II*, in a single push. Hans Kammerlander accompanied him also for the NW face of *Annapurna* (8091m), which had several times been attempted by leading mountaineers, and, a little later, for storming up *Dhaulagiri* (8167m) in 2½ days.

The Causes and Elements of Success

After his four repeated summits, and the failed attempts which have been mentioned, Messner in 1986 was under 'compulsion to complete', if he was to become the first to have climbed all the 8000ers. In fact the 'race', much dramatized by the media, took place only between him and the Pole Jerzy Kukuczka; the two Swiss 'rivals', Marcel Rüedi and Erhard Loretan, were in the present year still somewhat too far behind. (*Translator's note.* Marcel Rüedi died on *Makalu*, 25 September 1986.) Because of the competitive pressure Messner 'played safe' for the ascent of his last two 8000ers, *Makalu* (8485m) and *Lhotse*, with good acclimatization, Sherpa support and prepared camps—all this, however, only after three attempts on *Makalu* and two on *Lhotse* had failed in very difficult conditions.

Where there is Light there is Shade

Climbing at extreme altitude is the most dangerous form of mountaineering. With Kukuczka, Scott and Loretan, Messner is one of the few to have survived this passion. Success and survival lie close together; at their root lie, next to the imaginative power to think of new approaches and to carry them through,

experience, strength in performance, good instinct and well-chosen tactics. Messner possesses all these qualities to a high degree, and he always took time to acclimatize and to wait, but then, at the decisive moment, he would strike with maximum speed. We have already emphasized his ability, so essential for survival, to retreat from a mountain. Of course, a fair share of luck also played a part in some of his undertakings, for example on Nanga Parbat, when enormous masses of ice collapsed over the route which Messner had just climbed, or when, on his solo Everest climb, he fell into a deep crevasse, from which he managed to escape.

No mountaineer, with the exception of Edmund Hillary, has ever become as well known as Reinhold Messner. His success and his personality arouse emotion and polarize opinion. His friends know him as a man who is generous, yet decisive, rich in stimulating ideas and not infrequently warm and cordial. To his many admirers who, not unexpectedly, are particularly numerous in Germany, he is simply the greatest mountaineer of all time, a true hero. To envious rivals he is a constant annoyance, not only because of his mountaineering achievements, but also because of his commercial success. This overlooks the fact that success did not fall into his lap. With enormous self-discipline and industry he wrote 25 books, among them some so rich in ideas as *Der 7. Grad* (translated as *The seventh grade*) or *Grenzbereich Todeszone*, and others which are profound accounts of mountain and personal experience, such as *Alleingang am Nanga Parbat* (translated as *Solo Nanga Parbat*) or *Der gläserne Horizont*.

However, Messner is not too scrupulous about the lucrative marketing of his name, as is shown, for example, by the range of beverages which were and still are advertised under his name: they range from 80 per cent rum to milk, via sparkling wine, tea and mineral drinks. Discriminating critics who reject Messner object to his sensationalism, shown by the remorseless display of photos of dead mountaineers, or by including artificially steepened climbing photos in some of his publications. Indeed, today's most successful mountaineer has no need for such tricks; the reality of the 8000ers and their ascent is drama enough. However, in his case self-display dominates over other values. Also there is little that is flattering in his views on rivals and former friends. Messner's abusive tirades directed against his former climbing partner Peter Habeler are embarrassing only for himself. They stem from the vulnerability of the hero, apparently so cool and superior, who is quite capable of feeling emotion which, however, tends to show itself only at moments of disappointment. One should therefore remember that men with the imagination and ability to open up new horizons are, more often than not, difficult and uncomfortable personalities.

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