

We had now been on the traverse for 15 days and it was time to ski out. The unknown glacier system over the pass proved kind to us in providing an easy descent for laden pulks as we glided through stunning scenery to reach the Petrov glacier. Encountering isothermic snow, we roped up, stepping and poling out of trouble to a lunch stop on a medial moraine.

We continued on crusty ice running with meltwater streamlets to the steepening snout of the Petrov glacier. There we were fortunate to find a long ramp that led to just a 2-3 metre near-vertical step down to the snowy banks of a glacial stream. Passing down rucksacks and lowering pulks from an ice screw, the team worked like a well-oiled machine as we climbed down in crampons to gain the moraine. The stream bed led to a beach of fine outwash on the shores of Lake Petrov where we camped. We reckoned we could make it to the transport rendezvous next day so used the satellite 'phone to call in Top-Asia a day early. Our journey was nearly over.

But there was a sting in its tail.

The lake ice would not bear our weight so we were forced to strap skis to our rucksacks and drag our pulks along increasingly chaotic moraine banks. It was a nightmarish effort. When we reached the pumping station, the Kyrgyz workers were impressed enough with our travail to supply us with strong sweet tea.

The Kumtor goldmine ensures that there is good access to this side of the range but dragging the pulks along gravel roads soon removed what was left of the runners. Fortunately Mike Sharp was offered a lift by a passing truck. He managed to contact the mine security force and had no trouble persuading them to escort us off-site in their vehicles. We must have looked pretty wasted as they also donated a pile of sandwich rolls: all meat, to the disgust of the veggies! After a final night camping at the ruined Meteorological Station rendezvous we were picked up by a delighted Rimma, our liaison person, in a 4WD truck.

Safely back in Bishkek despite a clutch breakdown, we sampled the luxury of our modern hotel's swimming pool in temperatures of more than 30° and, like true monomaniacs, spent our contingency day exploring some of the Kyrgyz range with a visit to the Ala Archa gorge.

On returning to the world of mass communications I was hit by a hammer blow, learning of the death of a good friend, Tomas Olsson, whose abseil anchors had failed during an attempt to ski the Norton Couloir on Everest. I think he and I had both had misgivings about the commercial pressures surrounding his attempt, and it is thanks to financial support from the ESC, MEF and BMC that this expedition did not suffer from such pressures.

My thanks also to Derek Buckle, Alastair Cairns, John Goodwin, Lizzy Hawker, Anna Seale and Mike Sharp, for all the fun, good company, and teamwork: an interesting mix of age, experience and youthful enthusiasm.

Summary: A traverse of the Ak-Shirak range from south to north with first ascents of seven peaks exceeding 4600m. 29 April to 21 May 2006.

OSAMU TANABE

Lhotse South Face Winter Ascent ~ The Dream Comes True

A Japanese proverb says that success will come on the third time. The great south face of Lhotse had defeated we members of the Tokai section of the Japanese Alpine Club in December 2001, when we reached 7600m, and again in 2003 when we reached 8250m, though we called it a 'near ascent'. It had been a hard road. When we were defeated in 2003, I felt personally that I would not come back to Lhotse. It would be possible to draw up climbing tactics but the falling rocks were too dangerous. The fact that no accidents took place on the previous two attempts is to be much appreciated. I told myself that we might be proud and satisfied with the safety record of those climbs, but I was very much afraid we could not make a third attempt without fatal accidents. I asked myself 'Can I never climb this face again?' Frustration caused regretful tears and I realised I wanted to climb the south face so very much.

In 2005 I joined an expedition from Gunma Prefecture Mountaineering Federation to Nanga Parbat, teaming up with Noriyuki Kenmochi, who shared my enthusiasm. This triggered the third challenge on Lhotse's south face and soon we had gathered together six strong and experienced climbers. We also increased numbers of climbing Sherpas from 15 to 18. We had organised a powerful team to try and ensure success. (A team of the Gunma Federation succeeded in the first winter ascent of the south-west face of Everest in 1993.)

On 3 September 2006 the team departed from Japan, first to Shisha Pangma for altitude acclimatisation and climbing training. In spite of heavy snow, all the members reached the main summit (8027m) on 9 October. After a rest in Kathmandu we journeyed to the Khumbu and entered base camp at 5200m near the right bank of the Lhotse glacier. There we met a Korean party led by Lee Choongjik. We decided to conduct a joint operation on the south face, and accordingly we shared the work of fixing ropes. Six thousand metres of rope had been carried in, of which 5700m was used.

The south face that I saw after three years' absence was guarded with much snow because of heavy snowfall in the autumn. On 18 November we started climbing and on the 21st camp one (C1) was set up at 5900m on the same spot as in 2003.



44. Climbing the upper part of the couloir at 8300m. The yellow rock wall at the top of the couloir was detoured around to the left. (*Osamu Tanabe*)

Thereafter the wind became troublesome. It was not as fierce as in mid-winter but it was strong enough to blow away Atsushi Senda and Toshio Yamamoto and throw them 10 metres, at about 6800m on 28 November. The two climbers did not fall down the face, being protected by the fixed ropes, but it was very difficult to advance. The strong wind caused powder avalanches and falling rocks often beset Sherpas who were ferrying up the loads. A succession of casualties among the Sherpas depleted our resources and reduced our potential. Despite these hardships, on 1 December camp two (C2) was set up at 7100m and on the 6th a provisional camp three (C3) was placed at 7300m. On 7 December, we overcame a difficult pitch on the rock wall above the provisional C3, but the strong wind of the following day stopped our activities for five days. 'Pre-winter' ceases on Christmas Day in a normal year, after which a cold and violent gale of winter starts to blow and makes climbing impossible. At the beginning, therefore, we had judged Christmas to be a time limit. But our climbing speed was so slow that we were much delayed and were forced to extend the time for continuing the ascent. Fortunately the monsoon season lasted longer in 2006 than in a normal year, and consequently winter came later too.

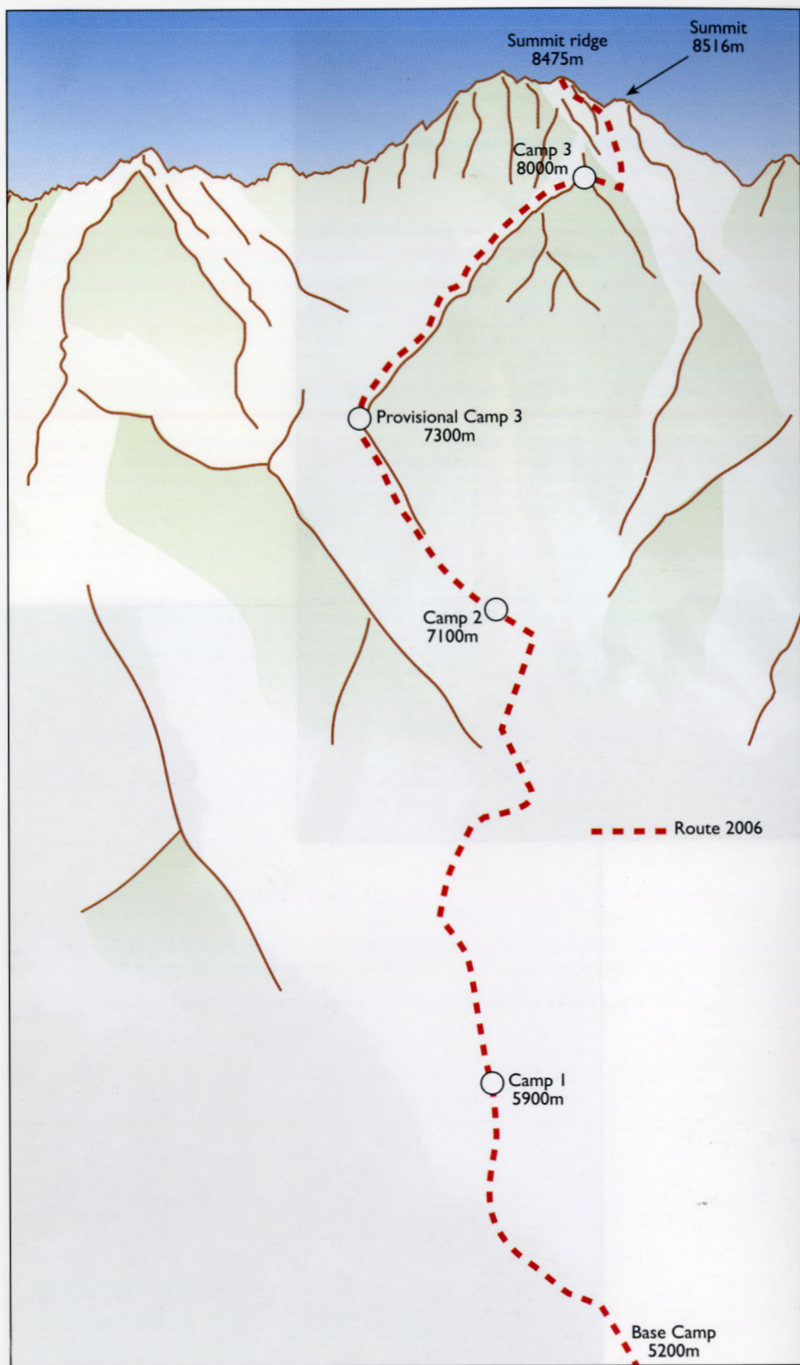
Climbing resumed on 13 December. One of the reasons for the failure in 2003 was considered to be the location of C3, which was set up 150m lower than had been planned. In 2006, the Tanabe party, comprising Takahiro Yamaguchi, Ngawang Tenzi Sherpa and myself, took charge of route paving to C3 and then steadily advanced the route to 8000m. On 21 December, the long awaited C3 was established and the Senda party, comprising Atsushi Senda, Noriyuki Kenmochi and Pema Tsering Sherpa, set off for the summit, collaborating with An Chiyoung of the Korean party. At that moment I estimated that three days of climbing would take us to the summit, and I hoped that the Japan-Korea joint team would finish the first winter ascent of the Lhotse south face.

The Senda party chose a different route to that of 2003. They entered a couloir that went up to the left shoulder of the summit. They gained height step by step but reached only 8200m in three days. With time telling against them, the Senda group ceased climbing and the Tanabe party took over.

On 26 December, the first day after the changeover, the Tanabe party climbed up to the uppermost part of the couloir, 200m from the Senda party's high point. There we found an old fixed rope left on the couloir. It was a big surprise as I thought that nobody had ever climbed the couloir and naturally had never imagined we would have had forerunners. The last part of the couloir was a vertical rock wall of 20m with no cracks that was impossible to break through. The forerunners' footsteps disappeared here. I had believed that the couloir would prove a feasible route to the left shoulder of the summit. But actually it was a dead end.



45. Overall view of the Lhotse south face.
(© *The Chunichi Shimibun Ltd*)



46. The same view of the Lhotse south face depicted as a diagram showing the 2006 route and approximate heights of camps. (Diagram by Gary Haley)



The only possible line seemed an apparently fragile rock wall on the left side of the couloir. This wall led to the summit ridge but we would have to descend and again ascend the ridge in order to stand on top. That would be exhausting toil, but there remained no alternative option. To be prepared for the next day, after having advanced by a 50m pitch along the left side of the couloir, we returned to C3. On the 27th, Yamaguchi opened a route boldly traversing the fragile wall. We continued to climb, finishing with an extremely difficult push on a snow face that was nearly vertical and made of snow like glass-powder. We found ourselves on the summit ridge at 8475m, with Everest, trailing snow streamers, just in front of our eyes. The time was 15:35. At last we had accomplished the complete winter ascent of the Lhotse south face. It was a moment when I was deeply touched and my dream came true.

There still remained about 200m to the summit in horizontal distance from the point where we stood on the ridge. But we would have to descend and then ascend the ridge if we were to gain the summit. We had no surplus energy to do so and began our return without hesitation.

Now I recollect the hard but enjoyable days inspired by the giant wall. The Lhotse south face was a goddess who warmly kept a close watch and protected us from dangers. During the three expeditions nobody was lost or suffered from frostbite. Not a single finger was lost. We were not merely fortunate, but the goddess blessed us and led us safely to success.

Summary: An account of the first winter ascent of the south face of Lhotse in November and December 2006 by members of the Tokai section of the Japanese Alpine Club, led by Osamu Tanabe. It was Tanabe's third attempt on the face and the summit ridge was gained on 27 December. Expedition members: Noboru Onoe (63) general leader, Osamu Tanabe (45) leader, Atsushi Senda (32) sub-leader, Katsuhito Fujikawa (41), Noriyuki Kenmochi (37), Takahiro Yamaguchi (33), Toshio Yamamoto (32), Goro Takenaka (46) base camp manager.

The 2006 route largely detoured around a rock wall at 8200m that Tomo Cesen reportedly climbed on his claimed solo ascent of 1990. The rope found in the uppermost part of the couloir is believed to date from attempts on the face by Polish teams in 1985, 87 and 89.

Opposite page

47. Everest viewed from the summit ridge of Lhotse at 8475m after the ascent of the south face. (*Osamu Tanabe*)
48. Traversing a fragile rock wall at 8350m to detour around the uppermost part of the couloir to the left. (*Osamu Tanabe*)