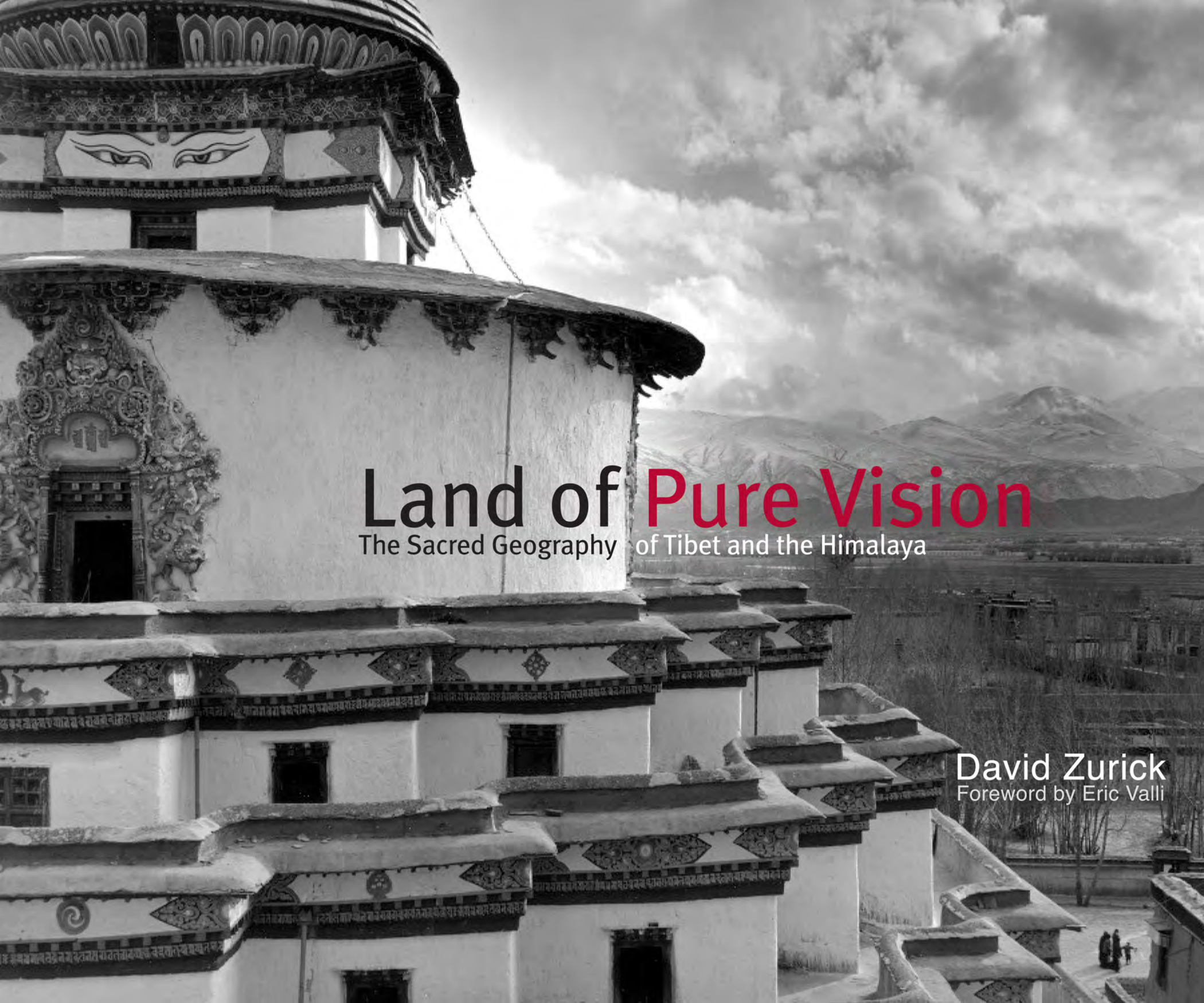
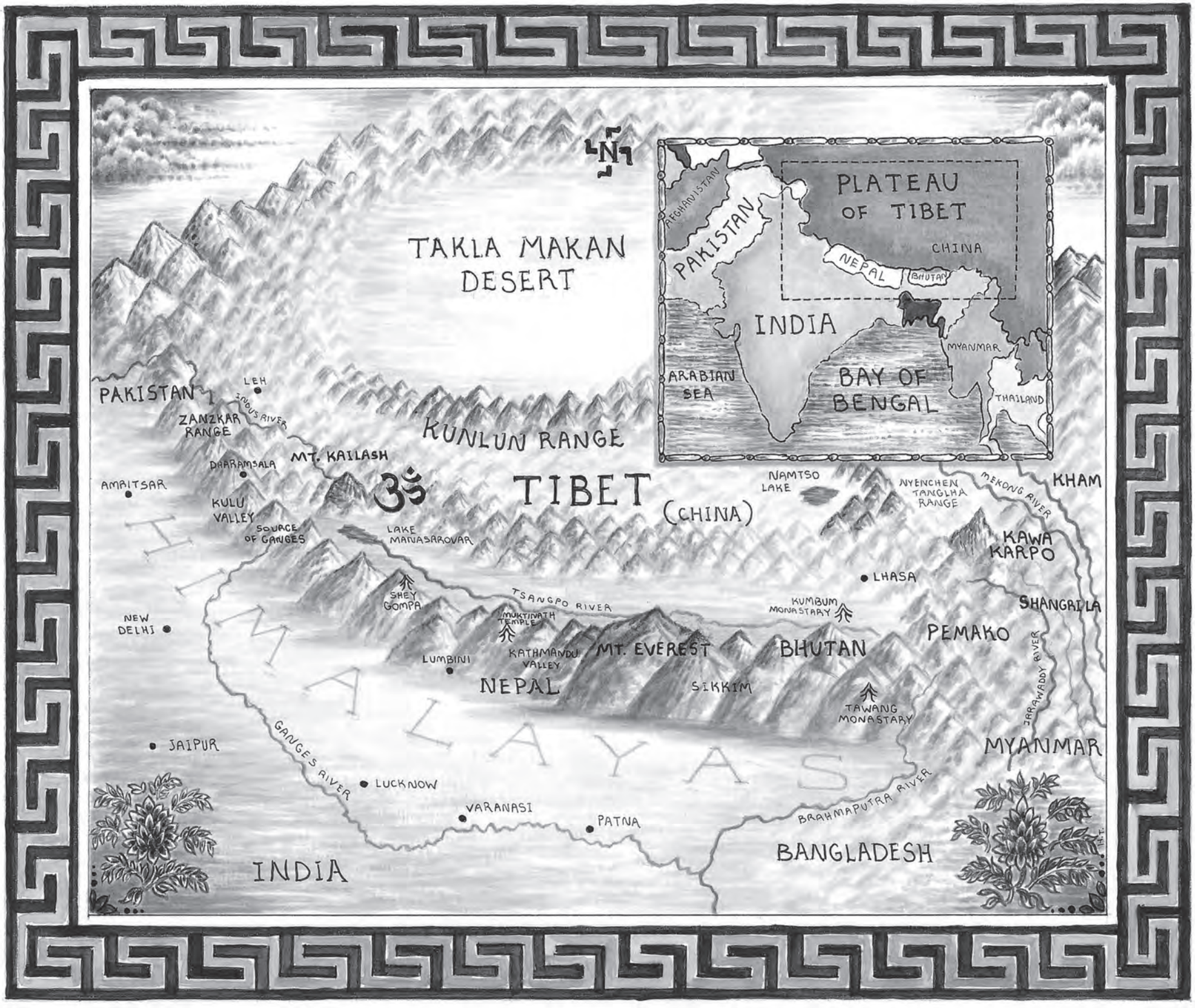


Land of Pure Vision

The Sacred Geography of Tibet and the Himalaya

David Zurick
Foreword by Eric Valli

Land of Pure Vision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INDIA

LAND OF PURE VISION

The Sacred Geography of Tibet and the Himalaya

David Zurick

Foreword by Éric Valli
Design by Richard Farkas
Map by Holly Troyer

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For Sam Mitchell (1956–2011)
In memoriam

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

It's often my search for hidden lands—*beyul*, as the Tibetans call them—that triggers my most beautiful and wild adventures. That's why David Zurick's quest in the Himalaya for what he calls sacred architectures interested me straightaway. Imagine a several years' journey crisscrossing by all imaginable means the most mysterious places in the world. Indeed, as I am writing these lines, he is preparing to go back for the last picture, carrying his large-format camera, in order to capture somehow the magic that connects human beings to these mythical places.

Although we have different backgrounds and approaches—David's those of a scholar, mine those of a cabinetmaker/Boy Scout—we are both interested in the relationship between nature and humankind: How does nature mold humankind, its culture, its tradition and . . . how does humankind mold nature in order to survive? This is the most magical alchemy. Trying to understand it takes you to the heart of life itself. How many times, reaching one of these power places—me, the atheist—did I silently pray to the spirits I could feel around me?

There is a Zen quality to this book I really like. The quality of David's photographs has to do with his artistic eye, for sure, but it is an eye nourished by an intimate knowledge of the place. This book is born from the fascination of the author with this part of the world. Above all, it is a love story. Thanks to the choice of a large-format camera, each picture pulls you in. You hear the silence, feel the wind, the cold, the peace, and the magic . . . then you begin to understand why such places have drawn so many fine dreamers and adventurers for centuries. How can one resist such magic?

No wonder I fell under the same spell when I first set foot there in the early seventies. I remember meeting a salt trader traveling with his yak caravan across Dolpo. He couldn't figure me out. He asked me: "I keep meeting you here and there for months now. Why do you come here, to such a remote and inhospitable place, if it's not for making money?"

I answered that I was not a businessman. "I just come here because I like the place, I like its people, I like to roam, and . . ."

He suddenly understood. "Ha! You're a pilgrim!"

Yes, that was the best explanation. It's now David's turn to take us along on his wide and long pilgrimage.

Éric Valli

INTRODUCTION

Landscape as Sacred Map

In 2004 I began traveling in the Himalaya and Tibet with a large-format camera and sheet film to make black-and-white photographs of sacred places in the region: monasteries, shrines, and temples; scriptural carvings on rocks; prayer flags; the sources or confluences of holy rivers; revered mountains; forest sanctuaries and hidden treasure valleys; and numerous other consecrated elements in the landscape. These spiritual features populate the rugged terrain and are among its most remarkable cultural imprints. I was interested in how they might illuminate a particular way of *seeing* the world. It is customary for scientists and others to understand natural landscapes emerging from events that take place over geological or evolutionary time, giving an ecological shape to a place, but cultural landscapes result from human intentions and design and thus convey formal elements of anthropological study: social artifacts of history, power, beliefs, or aesthetics expressed in the landscape. My photographs in this project center specifically upon places of a religious or spiritual character, and thus foremost engage with human *ideas*—about sanctified nature; a sense of place; networks of worship, religious transmission, and learning; sacred architectures; and, inevitably, about changes that overcome places with the passage of time. Photographing a religious site in this vein is not simply a matter of taking a picture of holy scenery—rather, it is akin to delving into a rich repository of landscape meaning.

During the course of the project, I came to understand sacred geography as a kind of mythic cartography, wherein the abstract coordinates of latitude and longitude one commonly finds on a map are replaced with markers on the Earth's surface that delineate a cosmological organization of the world. Geographers refer to ideal or imaginary cartograms as mental maps—images of the world we hold in our minds. They take form as we navigate life and are influenced by our personal experiences and cultural backgrounds. They help us make sense of the world. The Sanskrit concept of *mandala,* which permeates the religious traditions of Tibet and the Himalaya, is one such kind of mental map. It imagines a celestial realm on Earth that may be physically imprinted as a temple wall mural, a sculpture or architecture, a sand painting, or, in the case of sacred geography, a terrain filled with known and revered spiritual places. This transposition of religious thought to the landscape extends the planet's surface to the empyrean. It engages the natural elements, a sense of place, and networks of movement and circulation that assemble the sacred sites into a comprehensive worldview. In such ways, and for some people, the world is made holy and the landscape becomes a touchstone for a reverent calculation of life on Earth.

The Buddhist, Hindu, pre-Buddhist Bon, and Shamanic traditions of Tibet and the Himalaya all pay special homage to places that are deemed spiritually powerful by virtue of their unique geographical qualities. Such places often have physical lineaments: a summit where the sky meets the land in a kind of *axis mundi* connecting heaven and Earth; the confluence of two or more rivers; a cave; a hot springs where fire meets water; or the upwelling source of a river. Spiritual practice transforms such geomorphological settings

Opposite: Shivling Peak, India, 2004.

into auspicious sites. Other sacred places have direct human origins: the birthplace of a saint, the architectures of monasteries and temples, hermitages and meditation shrines, or the residence of miracles. Here, too, their consecration as sacred places requires acts of devotion and ritual. Pilgrims journey among the sacred places of Tibet and the Himalaya in ages-old quests of atonement or to gain spiritual merit, following the mental trajectories of their divine mandala space much as a cartographer might delineate the pixelated lines on an electronic map.

In these ways, geography and faith combine to provide one with an enduring sense of place in the topography of Tibet and the Himalaya. Abode of deities, the mountains also are home to humankind. In making geography sacred, people strive to create meaningful and safe places to live amid the powerful forces of nature by etching the landscape with the inscriptions of human consciousness. When I first went about making photographs in landscapes containing such elements, I imagined them to be a kind of portal into the systems of belief from which they sprang—not literal thresholds into a supernatural realm, as might be imagined in some arcane religious practices, or even as simple religious scenery, but rather as revelatory of how a people or society might understand life and the natural world. I later came to realize, in my selection of places to photograph—their angles of repose, quality of light, evocations, and so forth—that I also was engaged with my own personal appraisal of sacred places in Tibet and the Himalaya. I, too, was embarked on a kind of spiritual journey—a picture pilgrimage.

Change, of course, is inevitable—in the landscape, among human societies, and within a person's life. It is a foundation of religious thought in the region, the very nexus of existence, and applies equally and in full measure to the spiritual elements of a landscape. While it might arise from the mental coordinates of faith or ritual practice, sacred geography in Tibet and the Himalaya is anchored to tangible places and abides the transformations in the landscape that occur alongside the broader shifts in society. It is testimony to the resiliency of faith in the region that so many sacred places remain significant to so many kinds of persons. Despite their visible alterations or the social and environmental dislocations that may arise among their cultural settings, the sacred landscapes remind us that we live together in a world of mystery and beauty, where the human spirit is in synchronicity with natural forces.

An Expeditionary Note on the Photography

Working with a big camera, I sometimes felt the urge to drop it from a cliff and free myself of its weight and cumbrousness. That feeling would arise most commonly during a long uphill climb when I was exhausted, or when I had to tediously load sheets of film into holders while the wind was blowing a gale and my fingers were numb from the cold. Mostly, though, I was happy to carry it into the mountains. The business of setting up a big camera always forced me to slow down and work carefully, which perfectly matched the purpose of my project. And when finally I centered myself into an image, peering with stillness through the camera lens at the

unfolding world, I couldn't imagine a better place to be at that moment. I was provided with countless unique opportunities to see the region close up and below the surface, and also to finally imagine it on a grand scale as having a kind of ritual as well as geographical cohesion.

During the course of the project, I had occasion to visit remote spots, some of which required long and arduous treks. The logistics of this were always difficult and the physical challenges sometimes daunting. Elsewhere, my photographs centered on easily accessible spots, including towns and tourism destinations. At first I thought it was necessary to concentrate my efforts on the difficult-to-reach spots, thinking they would be less disturbed and, therefore, somehow more truthful and authentic. I was mistaken, of course, because accessibility has little to do with a spiritual comprehension of the world or, for that matter, the authenticity of a place. Many of the sacred landscapes in Tibet and the Himalaya are accessible and open to view. To visit them requires no more specialized skills than a simple determination to go there. Places are changing fast, though, and as a result, some of the holy places are disappearing from view—in the extreme case we are left with the ruins in Tibet, but more commonly they become difficult to see simply because their surroundings are increasingly cluttered with the trappings of a secular society.

Naturally, I suppose, at the beginning of this project I first sought to focus my camera in such as a way as to achieve a "clean" and desirable image of a place or subject by excising the evidence of modernity. This is a relatively easy thing to do. In pictorial isolation, the sacred places of Tibet and the Himalaya would appear as pristine and unadulterated landscapes. I came to understand, though, that such a highly edited portrait, however romantic, was not at all what I had in mind. I was interested in visual confliction as much as equanimity in the landscape. I learned that the theme of the project would not be an elegy but rather a portrayal of how religious practice in the modern Himalaya sustains sacred places—remote or near, new and old—and how these places may undergo transformation as the societies from which they sprang continue to evolve and change. To see a consecrated place that is radically altered is not to say that it has disappeared from sight; finding a spiritual meaning in the landscape is always a point of view.

Land of Pure Vision

GALLERY ONE

NATURE

Geographers refer to mountains as high-energy environments due to the restless powers of tectonic uplift, gravity, and erosion. Working together in a geological cycle, these forces give rise in Tibet and the Himalaya to some of the planet's grandest architectures—a vast tableau of crystalline peaks, valleys, and sedimentary plateaus. The soaring topography blocks moist air circulating from the tropical ocean to produce seasonally intense precipitation along the southern flanks of the Himalaya, causing landslides and floods that threaten human life but also producing fertile farms at the low elevations and vast glaciers in the highlands. The varied terrain and hydrology of Tibet and the Himalaya, in turn, produce a kaleidoscope of natural habitat—with each adjustment in the repose of the land is yet another distinctive ecological setting that supports an astonishing array of native plant and animal life.

More than 50 million persons live within the seismic folds of the Himalaya. Their religions equate natural elements in the landscape with the emanation of deities and endow certain places with spiritual qualities. It is as if such designations recognize the inherent energetics of the natural world and channel it for religious effect. This could be understood in the case of a sacred summit such as Shivling in India, whose verticality might seem to connect Earth and heaven; of a holy river source—the headwaters of the Ganges, for instance, where water spouts directly from the snout of a receding glacier; of a spring bursting forth from the land itself; of a cave penetrating deep into the Earth's crust, such as those found in the Yerpa Valley of Tibet; or of a grove of ancient trees whose ecological processes conduct the flow of energy through a connective web of plant and animal life. Religious practice imposes order onto the natural features to fit broader supernatural reckonings of the world. A holy lake, for instance, might be filled with demons that must be placated, or a mountain peak might be the residence of a god worthy of worship. Some hidden lands, called *beyul*, are believed to contain hidden spiritual treasures left behind by a great saint. These places are the holy of holies. The upper Yolmo Valley in Nepal enjoys such a designation. In myriad ways, the physical landscape expresses an animated cosmology. To sanctify nature, though, is also to placate wilderness, to make it known and accessible, and to demarcate boundaries that distinguish sacred from profane space. Ironically, the very idea of sacred geography is both transcendent and reductive: it provokes inquiry into the place of a person in the world and transforms a natural place into a sanctified realm, but it also harnesses the wild and inexplicable aspects of nature to cultural matters of faith and ritual practice.

Opposite: Ganges headwaters, Bhagirathi River Valley, India, 2004.

Stupa, Khumbu, Nepal, 2004.

Yilhun Lhatso, Tibet (Sichuan, China), 2006.

Alchi, Ladakh, India, 2004.

Alchi, Ladakh, India, 2004.

Kawagebo (Kawa Karpa), Tibet (Yunnan, China), 2006.

Trongsa Dzong, Bhutan, 2004.

Ruins, Drukgyel, Bhutan, 2004.

Pha-chu Valley, Tibet (Sichuan, China), 2006.

Lake shrine, Pokhara, Nepal, 2008.

Altar rock, Kulu Valley, India, 2004.

Check post, Namtso Lake, Tibet, 2010.

Bhairav Kunda, Nepal, 2008.

Sacred confluence, Nepal, 2008.

Ice cave, source of Ganges, India, 2004.

Nojin Kangtsang, Tibet, 2010.

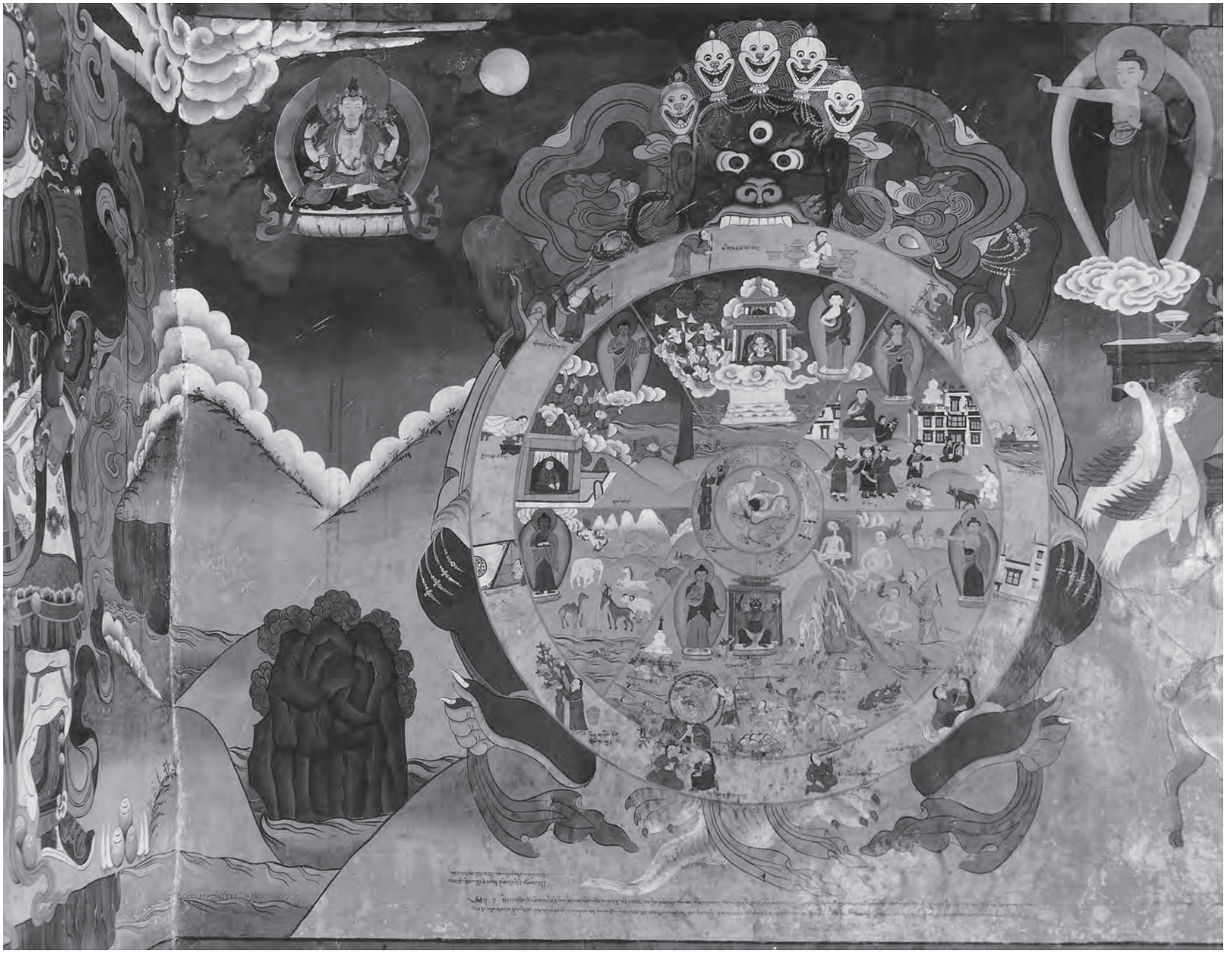
Bhagirathi Peak and Gangotri glacier, India, 2004.

Half-moon rise, Drak Yerpa, Tibet, 2010.

Yarlung Tsangpo River, Tibet, 2009.

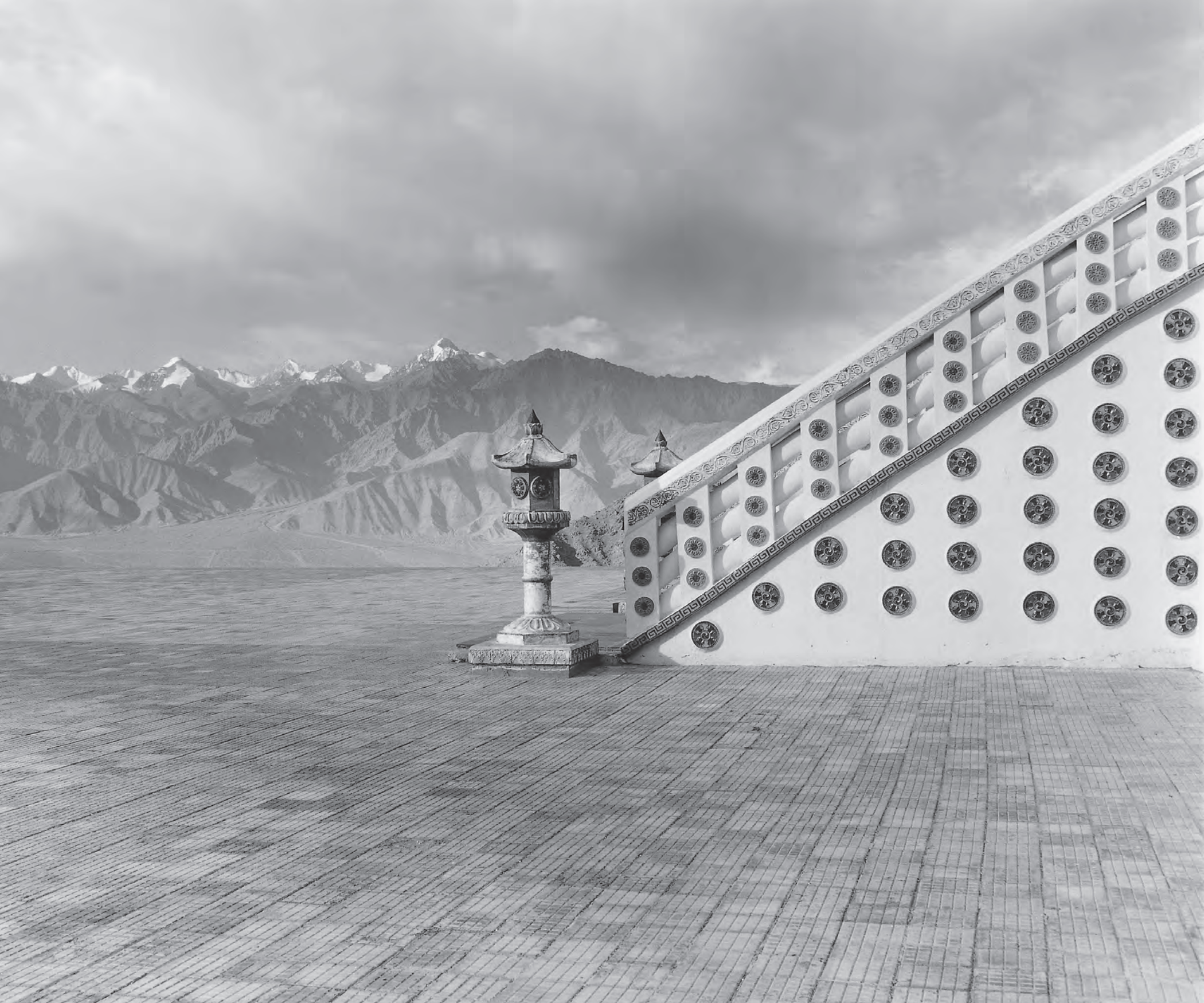
Lamayuru, Ladakh, India, 2004.

Dukhang, Alchi Temple complex, Ladakh, India, 2004.



Wheel of Samsara, Bhutan, 2004.

Headless Buddha statue, Nepal, 2008.



GALLERY TWO

PLACE

The geographer Yi Fu Tuan employed the term *topophilia* to describe the affinity a person may have for a place. He suggested that such affinity comes from a sense of both love and fear: love in the way that place-based experience and emotion create a flourishing and even devotional relationship to a particular spot on Earth, and fear in the perception of real and present dangers in the world—floods, famine, earthquakes, and disease. Both emotions are present in the sacred landscapes of Tibet and the Himalaya. The all-encompassing divine love that undergirds much of religious devotion is magnetic when it is applied to certain places, drawing in devotees hoping to experience a spiritual revelation or to gain personal salvation. Simultaneously, a fear of wrathful gods compels some people to pay homage to a spirit believed to dwell in a place. The wish to visit—or to avoid—the abodes of saints or the lairs of demons is to populate the Earth with places of tangible hope and appeasable danger. In such ways, a powerful sense of place, manifest as *mysterium tremendum,* holds sway over the minds of the faithful, and certain localities are deemed more auspicious than others. Such natural places become *sacred* places.

The instructions of religious teachers may also attract devotees to a certain spot. Their invocations, whether written down in liturgy or recounted in oral history, provide spiritual sustenance for people moving through a world that seems unruly and diffuse. In this way, a sacred place may be the site of a monastery or a temple; a mountain cave or a river source where a famous saint once meditated; a hidden scripture-filled treasure valley such as those believed to exist in Bhutan; or, more abstrusely, a landscape that is filled with a vague and generalized sense of divine energy in natural transmutation. The mythologies of Tibet and the Himalaya are replete with such places, and guidebooks exist for pilgrims wishing to visit them. Sacred places become the geographically determined points on a supernatural trajectory, much as the intersecting lines of latitude and longitude establish coordinates on a map.

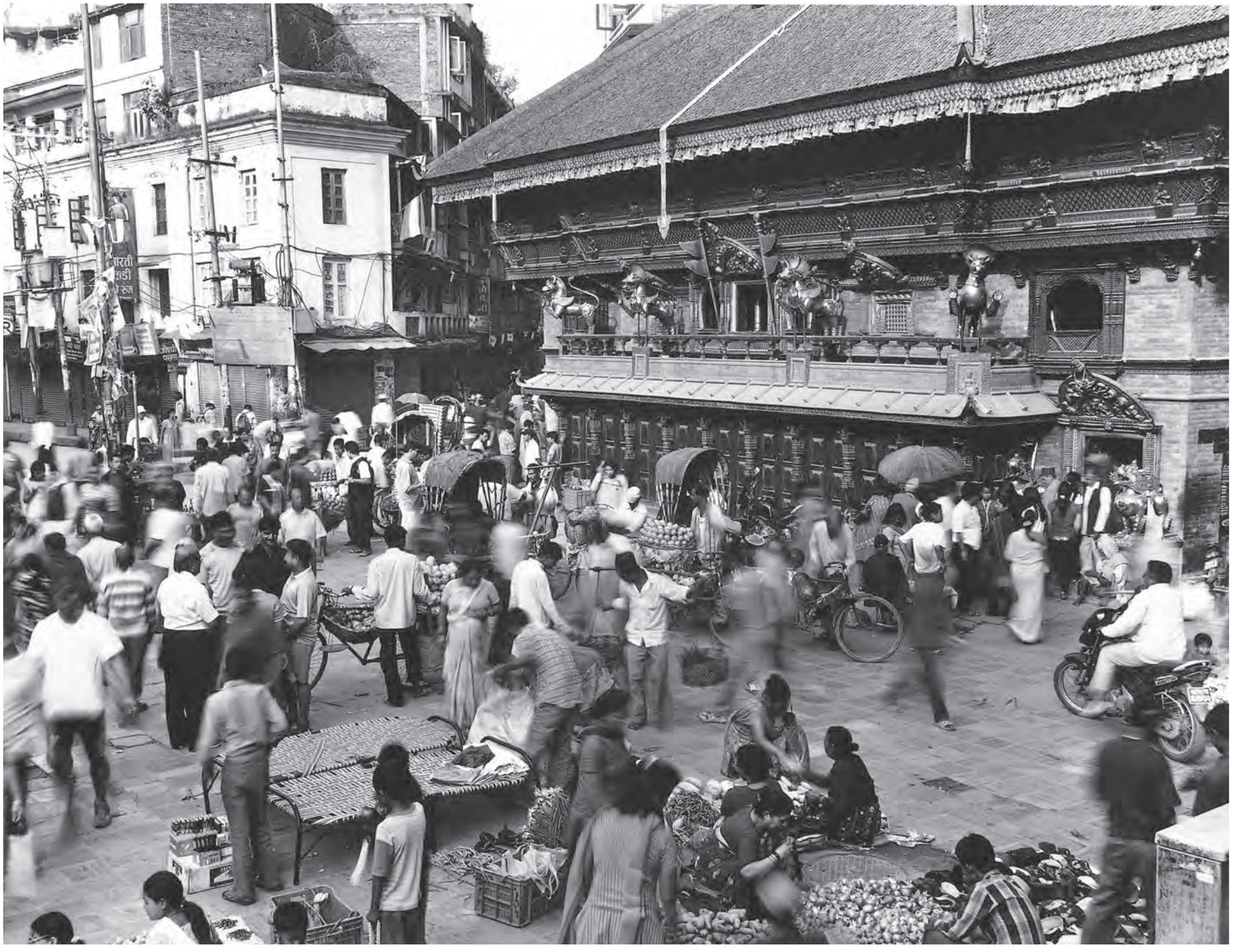
Cartographic topologies, however, are limiting—mathematically derived abstractions set into a two-dimensional grid representation of the world; the sacred places of Tibet and the Himalaya, on the other hand, are filled with emotion, ritual, and spiritual insight. One can determine a Cartesian relationship between points on a map and places on the ground using technological devices such as a Global Positioning System, but a sacred geography can be realized only through faith and devotion. Even then, though, most sacred sites require some kind of demarcation on the ground to be recognizable—for example, the symbolic architecture of a religious structure, a wall of stacked scriptural rock tablets along a path, a *stupa* in a forest grove or a cairn placed atop a mountain pass, or a carved statue or painted mandala set inside a temple. These sacred intaglios create places that people rely upon to navigate a mysterious world of deities and demons, hope and despair, and—always—the unfolding human consciousness.

Opposite: Shanti Stupa (Peace Pagoda), Ladakh, India, 2004.

Prayer chapel, Temisgang Monastery, India, 2004.

Litang Monastery, Tibet (Yunnan, China), 2006.

Thikse Gompa, Ladakh, India, 2004.



Akash Bhairava Temple, Kathmandu, Nepal, 2008.

Festival, Wanla Monastery, Ladakh, India, 2004.

Muktinath Temple, Nepal, 2008.

Yumbulagang, Tibet, 2009.

Male effigy, Mustang, Nepal, 2008.

Female effigy, Mustang, Nepal, 2008.

The Buddha's birthplace, Lumbini, Nepal, 2008.

Reclining Vishnu, Budhanilkantha, Nepal, 2008.

Kulu Valley temple, India, 2004.

"Milk Baba" mural, Kathmandu, Nepal, 2010.

Chaitrya, Gorakhnath Temple complex, Nepal, 2006.

Monks' quarters, Sungtseling Monastery, Tibet (Yunnan, China), 2006.

Summer picnic, Kathok Monastery, Tibet (Sichuan, China), 2006.

King’s tomb, Chongye Valley, Tibet, 2009.

Courtyard, Simtoka Dzong, Bhutan, 2004.

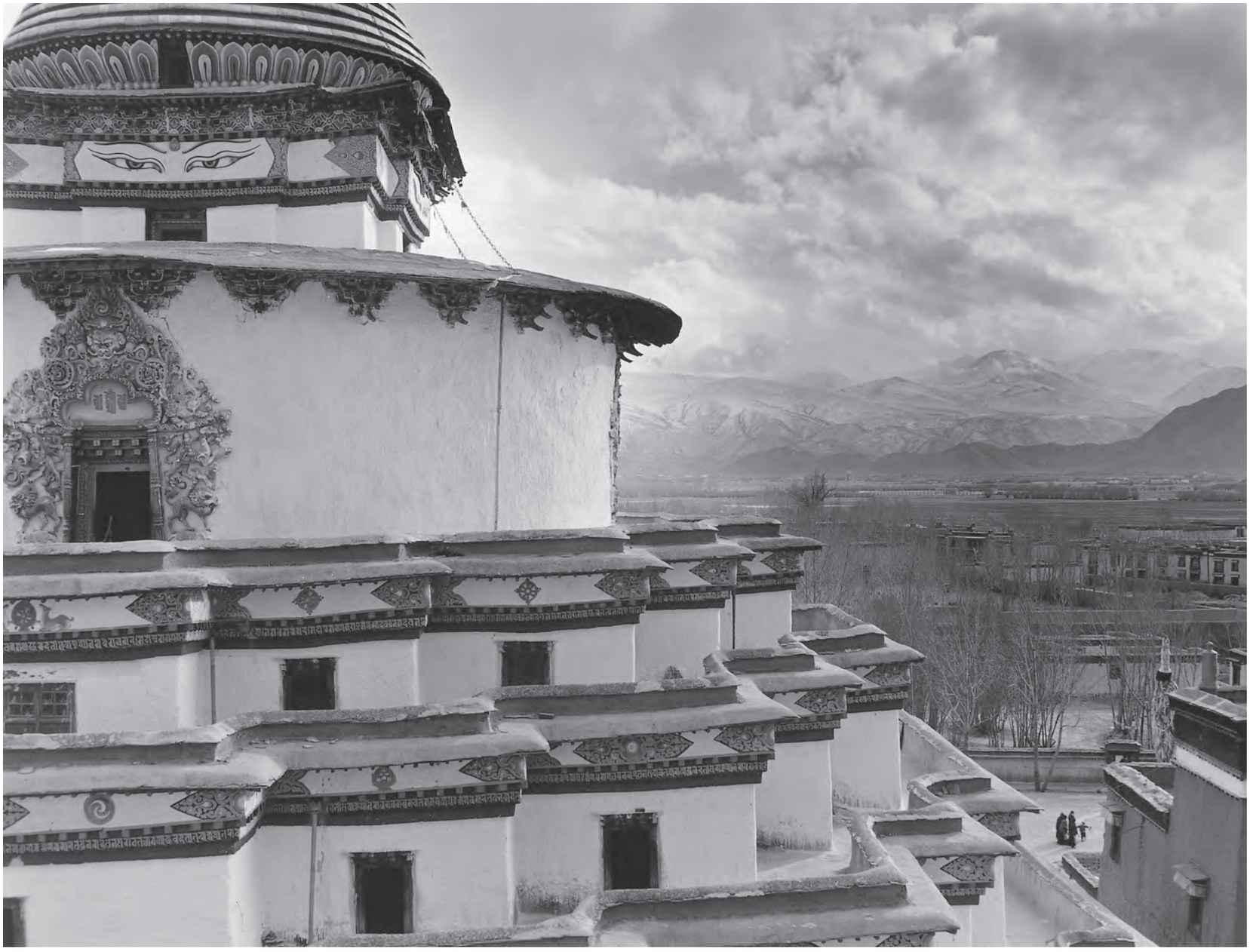
Sanctum Sanctorum, Themisgang Monastery, Ladakh, India, 2004.

Three monks, Kathok Monastery, Tibet (Sichuan, China), 2006.

Meditating Buddha, Swayambunath Temple, Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, 2004.

Laxmi-Narayan Pond, Kathmandu, Nepal, 2008.

Laxmi-Narayan Pond, Kathmandu, Nepal, 2008.



Kumbum, Gyantse, Tibet, 2010.

GALLERY THREE

NETWORKS

The places that appear in a sacred geography of Tibet and the Himalaya do not exist in isolation but rather are interwoven within a spatial grid of pilgrimage routes, ceremonial grounds, scriptural transmissions, and trailside markers, all made cohesive by religious practice. On a purely cosmological level, such connectivity may be perceived as a divine energy flowing across a landscape and through the heart of a person. This may be the case, for example, for Buddhists who view the plateau of Tibet as a pure land of enlightenment offering personal salvation from the endless cycles of karmic rebirth. It may apply to Hindus traveling to the four sources of the Ganges River, for whom the flow of the river is a fluid manifestation of divinity. A mythological equivalent might recount the peregrinations of a famous shaman or saint whose meditations and arcane teachings created holy spots that are ritually interlaced by pilgrimage. The transmission of sacred teachings at centers of religious study and beyond to a wider populace further circulates liturgical knowledge and sacred observation.

For people who practice an everyday kind of religion, the sacred places are most routinely connected by ritual and spiritual travel. This might entail visiting a neighborhood shrine or embarking on a once-in-a-lifetime expedition to a remote sanctuary. The distance matters not. Pilgrims follow a prescribed route, circumambulatory in nature, and are required to complete specified rituals at designated stopovers. Such spiritual travelers in Tibet and the Himalaya often endure lengthy journeys, frequently by foot and across rugged terrain—a stereotypical pilgrimage, but it also is common for them to travel in vehicles and to lodge in comfortable accommodations. In any event, the pilgrims provide a tangible—and humane—reminder of how faith and geography combine to produce networks of religious circulation.

To think about Tibet and the Himalaya in this way suggests a shared worldview among many of its residents—a kind of mental mandala cast across the region that compresses an entire cosmology onto the Earth's surface. Adepts of arcane Buddhist and Hindu scriptures are keen to discern such an ephemeral cartography and to locate within it the rootedness of genius loci. A pilgrim passing through a sanctified landscape moves among its sacred features, distinguishing metaphysical boundaries in the landscape, and consciously registers the gravitas of a sacred place. Pilgrims, in fact, by their very act of movement, *become* a connective tissue in the spiritual networks that compose a sacred geography. A pilgrimage thus is simultaneously a topology of the human spirit, an invocation, a journey of purification and merit, and the affirmation of a sacred ecology that binds faith to nature and both to a spatial ontology that resides deep within a religious reckoning of the natural world.

Opposite: Pilgrim, Drak Yerpa, Tibet, 2010.

Mani stone, Tibet (Sichuan, China), 2006.

Pilgrim, Uttarkashi, India, 2004.

Ceremonial ground, Gosainkunda, Nepal, 2008.

Prayer flags, Tibet (Yunnan, China), 2006.

Sadhu, Nepal, 2004.

Sadhu, Nepal, 2008.

Gochen Monastery, Palyul Valley, Tibet (Sichuan, China), 2006.

Pelkor Chode Monastery, Gyantse, Tibet, 2010.

Minstrels, Phuntsholing Valley, Tibet, 2010.

Pilgrim, Tibet (Sichuan, China), 2006.

Pilgrim, Tibet (Sichuan, China), 2006.

Roadside restaurant, Damxung County, Tibet, 2010.

Hot springs, Yangpachen, Tibet, 2010.

Rickshaw puller, Lumbini, Nepal, 2008.

Ashram resident, Rishikesh, India, 2004.

Cairn, Laurebina Pass, Nepal, 2008.

Map of the Sacred Road, Yunnan, China, 2006.

GALLERY FOUR

CHANGE

Change and dissolution are among the hallmarks of religious thought in Tibet and the Himalaya. From its inception, Tibetan Buddhism has stressed impermanence as essential to spiritual liberation—all attempts to cling to the past will result only in future suffering. The Hindu concept of *samsara* explains all existence as a continual cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth. Karmic theory embraces the transmigration of a person's soul. Even death will not stop change. The Shamanic traditions of the region are founded upon the ideas of altered states of consciousness and the interlocution of reality and the supernatural. It stands to reason, then, that transformation and dissolution should describe the sacred elements of landscapes that feature so prominently in the practice of these faiths. Temples fall apart; glaciers recede and sacred springs go dry; bombed monasteries are renovated along lines of questionable provenance; deity statues slowly succumb to rot, pilferage, or erosion; spiritual technologies undergo innovation; and pilgrims move along newly tarmaced surfaces. Sacred geography in its visible manifestation is a transient concept, and its superimposition on the landscape is subject to new designs.

None of this means, though, that religious practice in the region is anything less than what it once might have been. Apart from Tibet, where religious institutions were systematically destroyed by military campaigns and certain practices outlawed among the local populace, the visible changes witnessed at a sacred site tend to be gradual and incremental, occurring alongside the more profane alterations in the landscape, and religious practice is barely affected by them. Urbanization and a spreading megalopolis, for instance, overtake spiritual places in the Kathmandu Valley, threatening to remove them from view, but these sites remain vital for local worship. Pilgrimage destinations in Nepal and India are developed as tourist attractions, so that recreational and spiritual travelers find themselves together at a site with different, not wholly contradictory, purposes. Litter and graffiti may blemish the facades and grounds of temples or monasteries in urban settings, yet do little to deter their spiritual functions. More lamentable, perhaps, are the brazen violations of sacred space that occur when religious artifacts are plundered for commercial sale, or when spiritual monuments are razed to make room for new shopping centers or housing projects, swept away by landscapes, inundated by the rising waters of a hydropower reservoir, or, in the egregious case of Tibet, destroyed as a matter of government policy. This all makes it more difficult for one to see the transcendent power of spiritual places in the landscape. When its visible markers become more obscure, the memory of living in a sacred world loses some tangible evidence and a sense, perhaps, of a geographical immediacy.

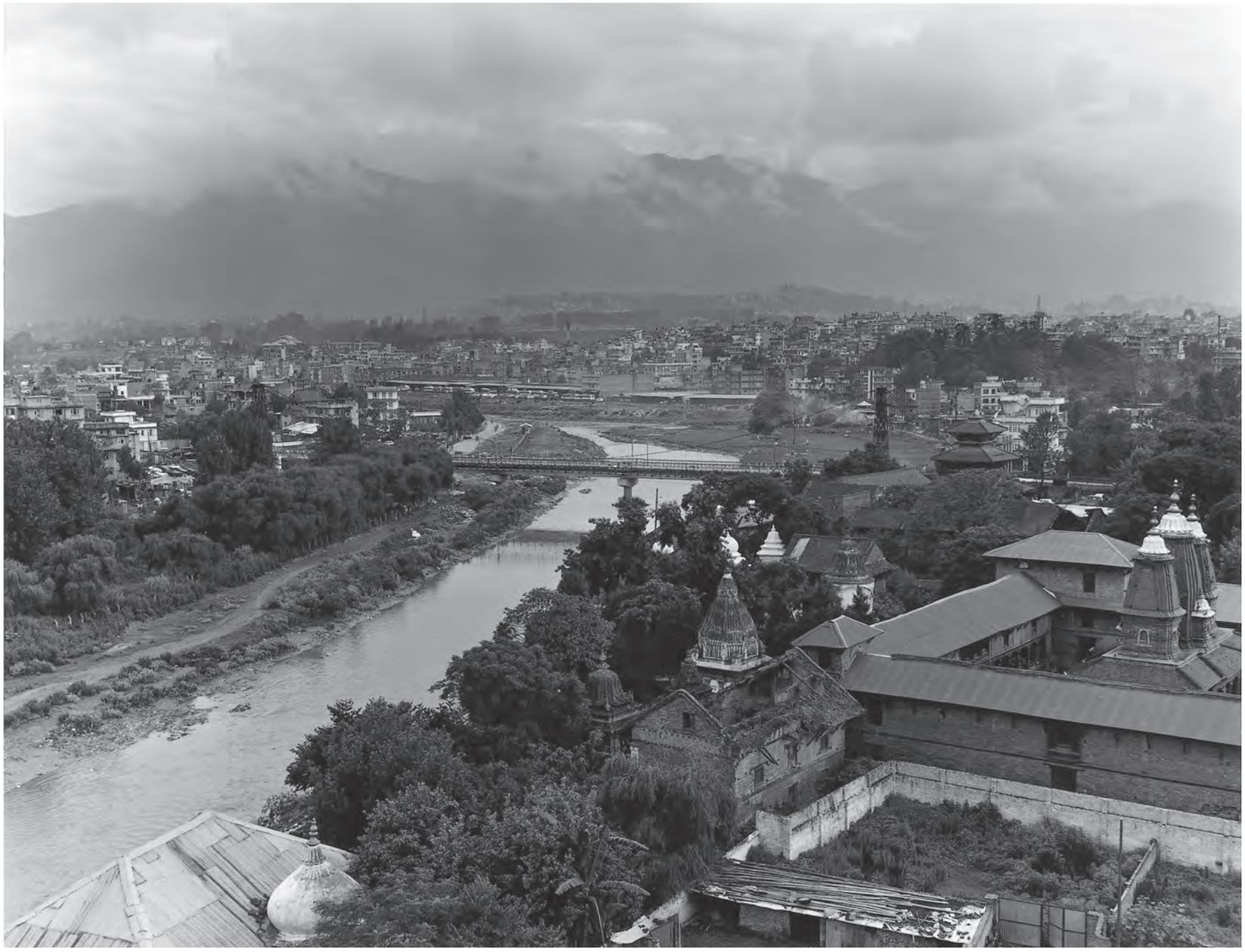
Opposite: Temple and basketball court, Shangri La, Tibet (Yunnan, China), 2006.

Café at Bodhnath Stupa, Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, 2008.

Potala Palace, Lhasa, Tibet, 2010.

Urban hipsters, Kathesimbhu Stupa, Kathmandu, Nepal, 2008.

Seven monks, Wara Monastery, Chamdo, Tibet, 2006.



Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, 2008.

Ranamuktaswore Temple, Kathmandu, Nepal, 2008.

Maitreya Buddha, Thikse Gompa, Ladakh, India, 2004.

Singh Gompa, Nepal, 2008.

Monastic ruins, Tibet, 2010.

Temple restoration workers, Derge, Tibet (Sichuan, China), 2006.

Nine novice monks, Choglamsar, Ladakh, India, 2004.

Monk, Dargye Monastery (Dajin Su), Tibet, 2004.

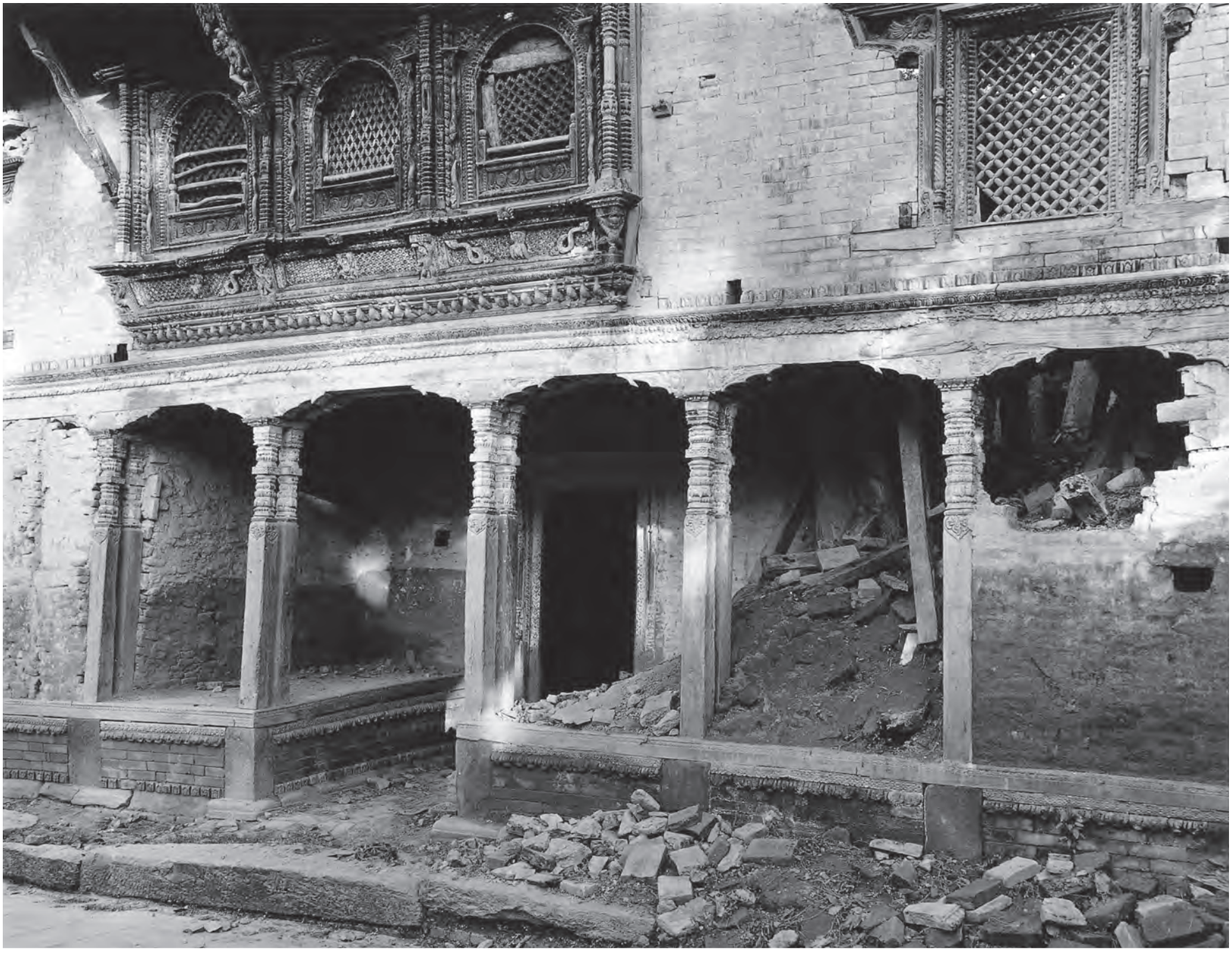
Festival grounds, Damxung, Tibet, 2010.

Thulo Syabru, Nepal, 2008.

Prayer wheels (spiritual technology), Mustang, Nepal, 2008.

Kali shrine, Rishikesh, India, 2004.

Burial shrine, Khumbu, Nepal, 2004.



Ruins, Pashupatinath Temple, Nepal, 2004.

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Opposite: Mt. Kailash, Tibet, 2013.

A NOTE ON THE LAST PHOTOGRAPH

The image “Mt. Kailash, Tibet, 2013” is the last photograph in my Sacred Geography series and the only one made with a digital camera. All other photographs appearing in this book are silver gelatin prints created from four by five negatives. The story is this. In summer 2013, I hauled my large-format camera and sheet film into western Tibet in order to make a photograph of the sacred mountain. It was a long way to go for one picture, but it would complete a ten-year project. The peak had eluded me throughout the preceding decade, for reasons either of bad weather or political unrest, and I had wanted to complete the Sacred Geography project with an image of Mt. Kailash and also to ritually circumambulate the mountain along an ancient pilgrimage route. This photographic expedition to Kailash meant I had to carry film through more than a dozen security checkpoints equipped with X-ray equipment, transport it across hundreds of miles of challenging terrain, and load the film in wind, humidity, and dust. And then get it back home again for processing. I’d been dragging my feet toward digital work for a number of years, but it became increasingly apparent to me on this final Sacred Geography journey that it might be my last film-based expedition in that part of the world. I exposed twenty sheets of film and then put the big camera away. A few days later, almost on a whim, I made a final photograph of the north face of Mt. Kailash with a digital camera. When I saw the image in the camera monitor I realized immediately that it was the most likely way forward.

David Zurick

CAPTIONS

x Shivling Peak, India, 2004. Towering above the Gangotri glacier is 6,543-meter Shivling Peak, the sacred summit of Shiva—the Hindu deity of death and rebirth. Each year, hundreds of pilgrims congregate in a sea of white tents in a meadow at the base of the peak and pay homage to their god. I climbed onto a ridge above the encampment to observe the ceremonial ground from a distance and to look upon the mountain. My companion, from a village in the region, had never been to Shivling, while I had heard much about it; so we took an opportunity to visit the site together—both, in our own way, on a pilgrimage.

Gallery One: Nature

2 Ganges headwaters, Bhagirathi River Valley, India, 2004. A priest from the Gangotri temple accompanied me on a trek to the Ganges source and related its mythology as we walked: how the mountain wind is the breath of Shiva and the river the flow of life. He asked me about the signposts we passed that marked the recession of a glacier, and I explained the Earth's warming trends and the loss of ice across the Himalaya, asking what it might mean for Hinduism, should the Ganges River go dry because its glacier had melted and disappeared. He shrugged his shoulders and said we live in the age of Kali—darkness—what can one expect?

4 *Stupa,* Khumbu, Nepal, 2004. A *stupa* is a reliquary holding the remains of a saint or a religious object. In simple form, it appears as a hemispheric mound of mud or rock. More elaborate versions support a dome overlooked by painted Buddha Eyes and with architectural components symbolizing the cosmos. The mud and rock stupas of the high Tibetan-settled valleys, with their handsome patinas of lichens and moss, appear to have been shaped of earthen clay as if by a potter's hand, abraded by the natural elements of wind and rain.

5 Yilhun Lhatso, Tibet (Sichuan, China), 2006. I had crossed a 4,916-meter pass in the Chola Mountain to arrive at the holy lake of Yilhun Lhatso as a storm set in. After the weather improved, I peered outside my tent to view a surrealistic scene: hailstones had painted the ground a ghostly hue, and angry black clouds swirled maddeningly above the lake; the water was an eerie green color and glowed as if lit from deep within. Around me were ice-covered boulders on which was carved in a cursive Tibetan script: "Om Mani Padme Hum." They protruded from the hillsides as anaglyptic pieces of the planet's crust and emerged from the lake like the prophetic tablets of Moses.

6—7 Alchi, Ladakh, India, 2004. The eleventh-century Alchi chapels nestle into a tributary cleft of the Indus Valley. Their conical shapes and mud and rock walls echo the surrounding mountains. I bent low to enter one of the structures, leaving behind the blinding sun and dust, and found myself surrounded by red-faced demons, yellow-robed monks, and writhing green goddesses. Preserved within their secretive chapels, these ancient paintings constitute one of the most stunning in situ collections of liturgical art in the world.

8 Kawagebo (Kawa Karpa), Tibet (Yunnan, China), 2006. Mt.

Kawagebo is one of Tibet's holiest summits and a popular destination for Buddhist pilgrims, who circumambulate the 6,740-meter mountain on treks lasting more than a week. In Buddhist philosophy such a circuit will wipe out the sins of a lifetime. Local legend describes Kawagebo as a powerful *tsen,* or atmospheric spirit. Jutting high into the sky, creating winds and storms and glaciers, the summit, indeed, produces its own weather patterns, so that its legendary powers have a firm foothold in meteorological science.

9 Trongsa Dzong, Bhutan, 2004. When the monsoon reaches Bhutan, much of the kingdom recedes into clouds. The annual precipitation exceeds five and a half meters—among the highest rates in the Himalaya. Rising from the mist are the eponymous *dzongs,* Bhutan's architectural gift to the world. The citadels dominate the old towns and the valleys of the kingdom. The Trongsa Dzong, dating to 1644 CE, is one of the most impressive sights in the kingdom. It too, though, gives way to the power of the monsoon and disappears from view whenever the clouds settle onto the land.

11 Ruins, Drukgyel, Bhutan, 2004. Beneath the 7,314-meter face of Mt. Jhomalhari lie the remnants of the Drukgyel Dzong. It was built in 1649 CE in commemoration of Bhutan's victory over Tibetan invaders. A fire from an overturned butter lamp destroyed the monastery in 1951, and Drukgyel was abandoned, never to be rebuilt. Its ruins are slowly being overtaken by vines and tree roots, with stone staircases crumbling back into the Earth's crust—nature reclaiming the spot.

12 Pha-chu Valley, Tibet (Sichuan, China), 2006. The Pha-chu River descends from the 3,930-meter-elevation Pelpung Monastery, a traditional center of the esoteric Kagyu (whispered transmission) sect of Tibetan Buddhism. The valley is a pine-clad gorge where it nears the monastery and then narrows further, so that my final passage along the river was closed in by towering cliffs, the trail forced to hug the cliffs. The topographic defile suggests a portal into the protected sanctuary of the monastery.

13 Lake shrine, Pokhara, Nepal, 2008. Phewa Lake is celebrated for its stunning reflections of some of Nepal's highest peaks, including Machapuchare and the Annapurna Range. I paddled a small boat into the lake, maneuvering my vessel toward the shimmering peaks mirrored in the open water, and watched the reflections recede at the rate I drifted toward them. I soon gave up the chase and turned my attention to a temple located on a tiny islet and then onto the shoreline of the lake, where I passed numerous small shrines tucked into the trees.

14 Altar rock, Kulu Valley, India, 2004. The Kulu Valley is widely known as the Valley of the Gods due to its dense concentration of temples and shrines. Enclosed by a cedar grove above the town of Manali is the popular 450-year-old Hadimba Temple. The surrounding forest is filled with older sites, including a number of abandoned rock altars of indeterminate age that grace the woodland. I stood atop one of the stone platforms among the giant trees and looked out upon snow peaks that rose high above the temple enclave.

15 Check post, Namtso Lake, Tibet, 2010. I first learned about Tibet's holy lake at Namtso from a friend who had described its cobalt disc of water ringed by snow-covered mountains, rock pillars, nomadic encampments and shaggy-headed yak, the wind, hermitage caves and monasteries, and above all, an ethereal quality of light bathing the landscape. I traveled to the lake one winter hoping to visit a pilgrim island that is accessible only when the lake is frozen. A series of storms had swept through the region, and the route to the lake was blocked by three meters of snow. The closest I

got was a check post located many kilometers from the lake.

16 Bhairav Kunda, Nepal, 2008. According to Hindu mythology, the 4,380-meter-elevation lakes at Gosaikunda derive from waters that formed when Shiva plunged his trident into the mountains north of the Kathmandu Valley. The three-pronged outline of Bhairav Kunda suggests this divine personification of the lake's origins. I slept in a herder's hut above the lake and observed a star-studded sky illuminating the lake and snow summits. The luminous scene further evoked a supernatural interpretation of the place.

17 Sacred confluence, Nepal, 2008. A stream fed by the springs of the Muktinath Temple flows into the Kali Gandaki River to form an auspicious geographical setting in the heart of the Himalaya. In Hindu tradition, two rivers meet to form a *prayag,* or sacred confluence, and the one located near Kagbeni village is especially important because it derives from the springs located at one of the Himalaya's most sacred temples. Pilgrims from far-flung places in India visit the high-altitude confluence to bathe in its frigid intermingling water.

18 Ice cave, source of Ganges, India, 2004. A stream gushes from an ice cave at the snout of a massive glacier to form the source of the Ganges River. When I visited, the sky was a lapis vault above the snowfields. Blocks of melting ice acted like prisms to bend the sunlight into myriad dancing rainbows. The interior of the ice cavity was a greenish hue. As my eyes adjusted to the dimness, I saw a bearded *sadhu* with knee-length, tobacco-colored dreadlocks seated naked on a boulder in the stream, his eyes closed in meditation within the crystalline enclosure.

19 Nojin Kangtsang, Tibet, 2010. Melting water from the glaciers atop the 7,191-meter Mt. Nojin Kangtsang feeds the holy lake of Yamdrok. One winter day I followed a frozen rivulet deep into the folds of the mountain. The cold and wind were intense, and the bleak landscape was unsettling. The stream would not thaw for many months. In hydrological terms the Yamdrok Lake is dead. It has no natural outlet and no perennial water source. Chinese developers recently began draining the lake to send its water to a hydropower facility, further jeopardizing the ecology of the lake and its place in Tibetan mythology.

20 Bhagirathi Peak and Gangotri glacier, India, 2004. I was seated one morning on a rocky ledge above the Gangotri glacier, looking out upon 6,856-meter Bhagirathi Peak. Behind me was the sacred mountain of Shivling. I was with a village friend who was on a pilgrimage to the holy sites of the Ganges River. My companion began to quietly sing a beautiful, haunting melody. The scale of the place was enormous—the shining wall of mountain and the huge glacier—and his voice had little echo in the vast space, falling away instead like quiet drifts of melting snow.

21 Half-moon rise, Drak Yerpa, Tibet, 2010. I often would visit a place with a religious significance and find myself attracted foremost to its geographical qualities. This occurred in Drak Yerpa, where I wandered away from the pilgrims' track and settled onto a ledge to watch the half moon rise over a distant ridge. The lunar orb entered into a clocklike conjunction with a chapel carved into a cliff face. I saw how the temple architecture mirrored the topography, its earth-tone colors those of the bedrock, with the land falling away in all directions, and found a good reason to be in the place.

22 Yarlung Tsangpo River, Tibet, 2009. A serene stretch of the Yarlung Tsangpo River presents a glassy surface in the early morning mist. Sand dunes on the opposite shore dissolve into the horizon, and a monastery appears in the offing. The rugged canyon land to the east, where the river wraps around 7,756-meter Mt. Namche Barwa, is called Pemako—known to the Tibetans as a *beyul,* or

treasure valley. In traversing the length of the Tibetan plateau, the river flows through the heart of its sacred geography.

23 Lamayuru, Ladakh, India, 2004. The Lamayuru Monastery rests in a fold of land above the Wanla River at 3,510 meters elevation, among craggy peaks and barren hills of silt sculpted by erosion into phantasmagorical shapes. The sediments undergirding the monastery date to the primordial Tethys Sea—from which the Himalaya uplifted more than 50 million years ago, and it was easy for me to imagine Lamayuru having been there all along, riding like an ark through the geological epochs on the great seismic waves of energy, bedrock, and time.

25 Dukhang, Alchi Temple complex, Ladakh, India, 2004. A carved balcony overlooks the veranda of the *dukhang* temple at Alchi. Steps chopped into a tree trunk form a ladder to an apse that houses fantastical clay deity sculptures. River rocks carved into mantras litter the patio. Elaborate murals cover the temple's interior walls, painted in colors derived from mineral and plant pigments, animal glue, and river sediments. Wandering around the place, taking in its organic elements, I thought the temple might have sprung from Earth itself.

26 Wheel of Samsara, Bhutan, 2004. A temple painting in Bhutan portrayed the Bhavacakra, or Wheel of Samsara—a famous mandala representing the world, karmic theory, and the course of a person's spiritual life. The symbols in the painting depict sacred landscapes and the various causes of human suffering. Yama, the god of death, reputedly holds the wheel up to a person at the point of passing, as if a mirror onto the person's past. Meanwhile, the Buddha points to the moon as liberation from the cyclical realms of earthly existence. The Bhavacakra is sacred geography set into spinning motion.

27 Headless Buddha statue, Nepal, 2008. The natural forces shaping the Himalaya—tectonic upheavals, climate, and erosion—acted at a micro scale upon a carved stone countenance of Buddha set alongside a trail leading into the high mountains. Its head has been lost to the seasonal expansions and contractions caused by temperature changes. A newly placed ceremonial scarf, or *kata,* adorned the statue, indicating that it was still revered among local people. I thought the statue evoked a natural synchronicity between the geological cycles of the planet and Buddhist ideas about impermanence.

Gallery Two: Place

28 Shanti Stupa (Peace Pagoda), Ladakh, India, 2004. The Shanti Stupa was built in 1991 by Japanese monks as one of eighty pagodas constructed around the world as peace memorials. It has a bird's-eye view across the Indus Valley and, ironically, overlooks the Indian Army's elite mountain division, whose soldiers are deployed on the Siachen glacier—the world's highest battlefield. India, China, and Pakistan skirmish over the land north of the temple. I dismissed the geopolitical disputes when I visited the site and discovered instead a dazzling courtyard dissolving Zen-like into the distant horizon.

30 Prayer chapel, Temisgang Monastery, India, 2004. Within a tiny chapel of the Temisgang Monastery I found the ritual objects of a tantric monk: loose pages from a book of scripture, a prayer bell, and a thunderbolt (*dorje*)—implements used to calm a mind, offerings, and a packet of matches to light the incense and candles. The room smelled of smoke, butter lamps, wool, and old wood. A deep calm suffused the darkness, and I was opened to the idea of worlds that might lie beyond my comprehension.

31 Litang Monastery, Tibet (Yunnan, China), 2006. The grassy plains of eastern Tibet are home to the yak-herding tribes of Khampa. Many of these nomads visit the Litang Monastery in summer when

they are in the area for an annual horse festival. I observed men dressed in sheepskins and fox-fur hats, sporting coral earrings and with silver daggers tucked into their cummerbunds. They gambled, played billiards on makeshift tables, or tended to their animals. Silk-robed women with disc-shaped silver jewelry and tightly braided hair glided past me where I stood in the shadows of a monastery wall. The human pageantry befitted the splendor of the monastic setting.

33 Thikse Gompa, Ladakh, India, 2004. The fortress bearing of the fifteenth-century Thikse Monastery hints at a contentious past—the internecine fighting that had occurred in the region with the historical invasions from Tibet or India. Cascading downhill from the main assembly hall are the monks' dwellings. Their tiny apartments are interconnected in a maze of tumbling stone staircases and blind alleys. The daily comings and goings of the monks echo among the stony hills—an ancient saga set amid a blistering landscape worn thin by the historical waves of conquerors.

34 Akash Bhairava Temple, Kathmandu, Nepal, 2008. In the center of Kathmandu is a temple dedicated to Bhairava—fierce manifestation of Shiva. A statue of the deity inside the temple depicts his frightful aspect: glaring eyes, multiple arms, a headdress of humanlike skulls. Meanwhile, outside the temple is the city's oldest marketplace, where a phalanx of bicycle rickshaws, motorbikes, salespeople, and pedestrians blurred past me at the busy intersection.

35 Festival, Wanla Monastery, Ladakh, India, 2004. I arrived at a road head in Wanla after trekking for several weeks in the Zanzkar Range. A religious festival was taking place in the village, and people were assembled in brightly colored tents near the monastery. Tables were laden with flat bread, pots of butter-salt tea, roasted barley flour (*tsampa*), and goat stew. The women wore elaborate outfits—woolen robes, felt boots, and top hats. The men, in a separate tent, drank barley beer, sang, and played drums. I felt lucky to be in that welcoming place, safely back from a long trek and among all the festivities and food.

36 Muktinath Temple, Nepal, 2008. The Muktinath Temple overlooks 8,167-meter Mt. Dhaulagiri from its perch above the Dzong Valley. The site is revered by Hindus, who call the temple Mukti Kshetra, or Place of Salvation, and by Buddhists, who know it as Chumig Gyatsa—one of the twenty-four tantric power spots on Earth. Spiraling ammonite fossils known as *saligrams* found near the temple are used as ritual talismans. Derived from the Tethys Sea and found only at high elevations, the saligrams affirm Muktinath's unique place in the seismic folds of the planet.

37 Yumbulagang, Tibet, 2009. The first Tibetan king built his palace on a hill above the Yarlung Valley more than two millennia ago. Much of what one sees at the site is a reconstruction dating to 1982. Still, it is an impressive place, with watchtowers, chapels, and fortress walls sprouting from the craggy ridge. The defensible character of the palace reminds us that Tibet was a conflict zone for much of its pre-Buddhist history, where local rulers fought with one another and against outside invaders, and not the oft-imagined peaceful place called Shangri La.

38—39 Male and female effigies, Mustang, Nepal, 2008. The medieval quarters of Kagbeni is a byzantine nest of narrow lanes and stone houses stacked together amid rough-hewn timbers and crumbling walls. Mud sculptures called "ghost-eaters" guard its alleyways. The village sits astride an ancient trade route between India and Tibet. In 1979 a nearby airport was opened, and in 2010 a vehicular road reached Kagbeni. Motorbikes and jeeps now roar through the village, raising dust and rattling old timbers, and the effigies find much to guard against in modern times.

40 The Buddha's birthplace, Lumbini, Nepal, 2008. Siddhartha Gautama was born a prince in 563 BCE in the village of Lumbini in southern Nepal. His birth temple and the pond where mother and infant ritually bathed are the sacred center of the Lumbini monastic zone. Shading the pond and draped in prayer flags is a bodhi tree (*Ficus religiousa*), a member of the species beneath which Siddhartha Gautama sat, meditated, and gained enlightenment, thereby becoming Buddha—the Awakened One.

41 Reclining Vishnu, Budhanilkantha, Nepal, 2008. On the outskirts of Kathmandu a statue of the Hindu deity Vishnu reposes in a pond on a bed of carved serpents strewn with marigolds. The stone figure appears to float in the murky, blossom-filled water. Outside the sacred enclosure when I visited, vendors peddled flowers and prayer beads, passengers disembarked at a bus stop, brothels and teashops brimmed with customers, and schoolkids cycled by with book-laden backpacks. The Vishnu statue all the while maintained its serene composure.

42 Kulu Valley temple, India, 2004. The sacred sites of the Kulu Valley have attracted pilgrims for many centuries. The Chinese monk Xuanzang visited in 634 CE and remarked on the valley's great number of Buddhist monasteries. A cluster of temples is dedicated to Hindu deities. Shiva especially is revered in Kulu, where the deity is associated with *charas,* or cannabis—hashish, a native plant that has been ritually used for many centuries in the valley. The shrub still grows near the temples, but its use now transcends local faith and botany, attracting narcotic traffickers and foreign tourists to the valley, perhaps in hopes of smoking their way to Nirvana.

43 "Milk Baba" mural, Kathmandu, Nepal, 2010. A life-size rendering of Swami Krishna Das, known in Nepal as Milk Baba due to his exclusively dairy diet, appears on the wall of a meditation room in a Kathmandu Valley temple. His countenance is flanked by two sacred icons—Mt. Kailas and the script *Om.* The former is a holy mountain in western Tibet revered by Buddhists and Hindus, while the latter suggests the cosmic breath of the divine. The paired symbols evoke the religious syncretism that is a hallmark of sacred places in Nepal.

45 *Chaitrya,* Gorakhnath Temple complex, Nepal, 2006. A stone staircase lined with *chaitryas*, or prayer chapels, leads to the Gorakhnath Temple. I sat on the steps one morning and watched the fog lift amid a drift of pilgrims, priests, and temple touts. Monkeys brachiated noisily in the trees. Penitents walked past with hands clasped behind their backs, lost in thought on a morning stroll, while the searing melody of a devotional *bhajan* floated in the air. A goat bleated in the forest.

46 Monks' quarters, Sungtseling Monastery, Tibet (Yunnan, China), 2006. A cluster of small apartments houses approximately seven hundred monks at the Sungtseling Monastery in eastern Tibet. During prayers, when the monks are sequestered in the main assembly hall of the monastery, their living quarters are empty and silent. At other times, though, the compound is lively with activity: daily chores, meals, bathing, card games, and radio programs. The stone alleys then are filled with the music of running feet—plastic sandals slapping rhythmically against the paving stones—and bright laughter.

47 Summer picnic, Kathok Monastery, Tibet (Sichuan, China), 2006. I followed a procession of robed monks up a steep hillside above the Kathok Monastery, thinking they were on a pilgrimage. The trail snaked for a ways up a narrow ridge, beyond which the monks halted on a plateau offering expansive views. They arranged sitting mats on the ground and emptied satchels of snacks and flasks of hot tea. A card game quickly ensued. Some of the monks sat comfortably in the grass while others strolled among the

wildflowers. It was a lovely place on a summer afternoon, and the monks had gone there for a picnic.

49 King's tomb, Chongye Valley, Tibet, 2009. The burial mound of the first dharma king to unite Tibet under Buddhism is located in the Valley of the Kings. It is outwardly a nondescript place. Tibetan tradition, though, places the king's coffin beneath the ground alongside a silver suit of armor and among life-size knights and saddle horses made from gold, a coral statue of a devoted retainer, and a cache of pears wrapped in silk. I let my thoughts wander to the imagined subterranean scene, which seemed more fitting for a king than the simple mound of cinders piled in front of me.

50 Courtyard, Simtoka Dzong, Bhutan, 2004. Simtoka Dzong was built in 1629 CE on a terrace of land above the river a short distance from Bhutan's capital city of Thimphu. The official name of Simtoka is Sangak Zabdhon Phodrang, or Palace of the Profound Meaning of Secret Mantras. It's the oldest surviving dzong in the kingdom. The weather turned bad when I visited the dzong, so I took shelter inside one of its silent courtyards. It felt ancient in there. Nobody was around. The only evidence of occupants was a monk's robe draped casually over a railing.

51 Sanctum Sanctorum, Themisgang Monastery, Ladakh, India, 2004. The interior of a monastery reflects the mandala architecture of the Buddhist cosmology. Accordingly, each room has a specific function in relationship to the others. The main assembly hall is where the monks gather to pray. Radiating out from it are *sutra* chambers used for debate or study, or to hold scriptural texts. A hallway pivots around a meditation chamber. This deep recess is the holiest place in a monastery, filled with deity statues, scroll paintings called *thankas,* and smoking butter lamps and sticks of incense.

52 Three monks, Kathok Monastery, Tibet (Sichuan, China), 2006. The conical hats worn by the Kathok monks protect their faces from the blistering sun. Their high-altitude monastery is a renowned center of dharma scholarship and has produced some of Tibet's most famous teachers. The monks spend much of their time indoors, among prayer books and their clerical duties, but during the annual Cham festivals they dance wildly in the open temple courtyard, performing a symbolic consecration of Earth. Their animated, costumed bodies become energy centers—their limbs are the planet's continents, heads represent the mythological Mt. Meru, eyes the sun and the moon.

53 Meditating Buddha, Swayambunath Temple, Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, 2004. The fourteen-hundred-year-old Swayambunath Temple sits on a hill above the Kathmandu Valley, within a sacred forest guarded by troops of rhesus macaques—the temple is often called the Monkey Temple. Encircling the main stupa are stone and plaster statues of the Buddha. Strung together, they link the points of the compass to a collective human consciousness. City residents circumambulate the temple, stopping at the shrines and statues to pray and to light incense, and thus to reaffirm the sanctity of the temple in the urban landscape.

54—55 Laxmi-Narayan Pond, Kathmandu, Nepal, 2008. Numerous sacred ponds dot the landscape of Kathmandu, providing the city with some breathing space by their reflective surfaces and shade trees. Tucked into a tiny plaza near the former Royal Palace is a small white shrine overlooking a tiny pond containing a delicate statue of Laxmi-Narayan—one of Nepal's finest carved-stone tablets. Historically, townsfolk used the water for daily needs, and it's still common to see people bathing or laundering at the site, as if it were a simple matter to share a pond with the gods.

57 Kumbum, Gyantse, Tibet, 2010. The thirty-five-meter Kumbum Stupa overlooks the Nyang Chu valley in central Tibet. Its decorative

trim work outlines numerous tiny chapels filled with colorful religious paintings. I climbed among the spiraling balconies of the stupa, ducked into the painted alcoves, and stepped back outside again time and again, experiencing the alternating darkness and sunlight as if a bright light were being turned on and off inside my head, so that the paintings were etched into my mind as fleeting stigmata. I halted at the top of the temple and let my thoughts unwind at the sight of the snow-dusted mountains in the distance.

Gallery Three: Networks

58 Pilgrim, Drak Yerpa, Tibet, 2010. The cave-studded valley of Drak Yerpa is one of central Tibet's most important meditation centers—an ancient place of sacred refuge filled with hermitages. The landscape shimmers in white stupas, juniper forests, monasteries and meditation cloisters, and prayer flags snapping in the wind. Some of the cave entrances are pockmarked with bullet holes from the Chinese military campaigns, while others are festooned with paper money recently pinned to the rock by pilgrims.

60 *Mani* stone, Tibet (Sichuan, China), 2006. A large carved boulder sits on a hill above a monastery in the Dzogchen Valley. Its cursive script catches the sun so that seen from a distance the rock might appear as a glowing billboard atop the rise. These religious rocks, called *mani* stones, are common in the Buddhist Himalaya. Most are tablet sized and stacked into walls that line the paths into villages and temples. It is rare to see one so big as that which overlooks the Dzogchen Valley, and easy for me to imagine the holy boulder as a kind of navigational aid for pilgrims heading into the valley.

61 Pilgrim, Uttarkashi, India, 2004. The tributaries of the Ganges River lie amid the snow peaks and glaciers of India and are affiliated with four major Hindu temples: Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath, and Badrinath. Together these places compose one of India's most sacred pilgrimage circuits—the Char Dham. The route to the icy headwaters of the Gangotri temple passes through Uttarkashi, a small river town that is home to ascetics who spend much of their lives traveling among the holy places of the Himalaya. I came upon a pilgrim seated by the Ganges, and we shared a cup of tea in the morning chill as the sun rose and lit the riverbank.

62 Ceremonial ground, Gosainkunda, Nepal, 2008. A cluster of prayer flags frames a mountain pass leading toward Tibet. To the south lies India. In marking the boundary of a watershed, the flags also symbolize the transition from Hindu to Buddhist worlds. There was no tension in the Himalaya where these two great faiths met. One of the compelling insights this region has to offer the world is the notion that ideological differences might be transcended by compassion and the human spirit. These flags fluttering in the wind provide a simple testimony of that profound idea.

63 Prayer flags, Tibet (Yunnan, China), 2006. The prayer flags strung at temples, between ridges, and at mountain passes signify a change in geography or commemorate a human achievement. Their five colors represent the Earth elements: blue for sky or space, white for air or wind, red for fire, green for water, and yellow for earth. When they snap in the wind, the flags are believed to fill the space around with goodness and spiritual merit. Once hung, they are left to flutter away in the sun and wind until they completely disappear—spent of their spiritual energy.

64—65 *Sadhus,* Nepal, 2004 and 2008. *Sadhus*—religious ascetics—are a ubiquitous presence at the Hindu temples. They appear among the grounds sparsely dressed, with painted bodies and wearing dreadlocks, jewelry, and assorted talismans, engaged in meditation and temple worship. The bodily decorations of sadhus have traditional ritual significance, but some further embellish their

appearances for tourists. These so-called tourist sadhus may be seen in the early morning hours making preparations, checking the effect in mirrors, and commenting upon one another's appearances as if they were the anointed cast in a grand temple theater.

66 Gochen Monastery, Palyul Valley, Tibet (Sichuan, China), 2006. An isolated tributary valley of the Ngu Chu River hosts the modest Gochen Monastery where Nyingma-pa scholars have lived for many centuries amid the forests and craggy spires. When the Chinese invaded the valley, the monastery's head lama, Khenpo Palden Rinpoche, fled to India and then to New York, where he established an international Buddhist center. His life personifies a dharma diaspora, in which famous religious teachers from remote monasteries in Tibet, estranged from their home base, give spiritual guidance to people scattered throughout the Western world.

67 Pelkor Chode Monastery, Gyantse, Tibet, 2010. The winter is pilgrimage time in Tibet, when farmers and herders have the leisure to visit the important religious sites. It's also when most tourists are absent from these places, kept away by the cold and lack of services. I watched a group of pilgrims bundled in woolen robes and carrying thermoses of hot tea move reverently through the quiet grounds of the Pelkor Chode Monastery. When they disappeared inside an assembly hall, I wandered over to some shuttered storefronts, where I found advertisements for snacks and cold drinks, digital memory cards, and postcards. All that would have to wait, though, for the summer holiday season to begin.

69 Minstrels, Phuntsholing Valley, Tibet, 2010. I was hiking in the remote Phuntsholing Valley beneath towering dunes when I came upon a tractor idled by the path. It looked to be stalled in the sand. Five minstrels jumped down from the bed of the vehicle when I approached, grabbed their instruments, and performed a song for me—as if they had been waiting for me all the while in that unlikely place. Following tradition, these wandering musicians connect remote Tibetan villages with lyrics and music that celebrate a shared spiritual culture amid the far-flung geographies of Tibet.

70–71 Pilgrim, Tibet (Sichuan, China), 2006. After its occupation by China, Tibet was carved into separate political subdivisions: the eastern sectors of Amdo and Kham went to the provinces of Qinghai, Yunnan, and Sichuan, and the central and western sectors became the Tibet Autonomous Region. Most Tibetans, however, still regard their homeland as a unified spiritual place, and many complete difficult journeys to affirm this cosmic cohesion, traveling hundreds of kilometers, often in full-body prostrations, to sacred sites scattered across some of the most forbidding terrain on Earth.

72 Roadside restaurant, Damxung County, Tibet, 2010. The Chinese built roads in Tibet that have usurped the old pilgrimage routes, making it possible for all kinds of people to cross the plateau: Han entrepreneurs from the urban coast greet Uighur traders hailing from the western desert; long-haul truckers pass nomadic encampments; herdsmen mingle with foreign tourists. A cultural stew simmers inside the small restaurants that have sprung up along the roadways: Beijing game shows blast from television sets while pilgrims mutter prayers and finger rosary beads, and ritual incense masks the odors of diesel and human sweat wafting in the air.

73 Hot springs, Yangpachen, Tibet, 2010. I was hiking in the Tanghla Range in the winter when it was bitterly cold, and after descending the mountains I visited straightaway the hot springs at Yangpachen. Sacred thermal baths are common in the region, used for therapeutic or ritual purposes, and I assumed I would find the normal arrangement of rock-lined pools, a sulfuric smell, shrines, and vents of steam issuing from yellow-colored cracks in the ground. What I found instead was China's largest geothermal power plant spewing discharge water into an Olympic-size swimming pool.

74 Rickshaw puller, Lumbini, Nepal, 2008. Surrounding the sacred birthplace of the Buddha is a ten-square-kilometer monastic zone. The enclave is home to numerous monasteries built by Buddhist societies from around the world. The zone hosts an army of local workers—masons, gardeners, ritual barbers, sweepers, teachers, guides, singers and musicians, archivists, "spiritual specialists" who conduct the religious rites—as well as foreign visitors. A fleet of licensed rickshaw cyclists ferries these people to their far-flung destinations within the monastic enclave.

75 Ashram resident, Rishikesh, India, 2004. The Ganges River tumbles down from the Himalaya to meet the Indian plains at the holy town of Rishikesh. Hinduism's greatest deities meditated here in mythological times, and famous swamis recently established international ashrams in the town. The Beatles visited and composed many of the songs that appeared on their iconic *White Album.* Among the town's pilgrims are teachers and engineers, businesspeople, taxi drivers, and politicians. Some have fully renounced their prior lives to follow an austere path of renunciation, while others keep a foot placed firmly in both worlds.

76 Cairn, Laurebina Pass, Nepal, 2008. Trail makers are common on the Himalayan walking routes, indicating a ritual place or signifying a way into the mountains, across a high pass, or through drifts of deep snow. Some travelers passing a cairn will add a stone to it here and there or build another nearby, so that over time a landscape of cairns may emerge in a single place. The small rock towers always prompted me to pause, to reflect upon what it means to journey through a difficult place, and to take comfort in the passage of others before me.

77 Map of the Sacred Road, Yunnan, China, 2006. The 5,600-meter Jade-Dragon-Snow-Mountain towers above the Map of the Sacred Road. Painted in Tibetan motifs with comic-book colors and flanked by carved totems in the style of Native Alaskans, the road is a bizarre new feature in the Chinese landscape of Shangri La. I climbed to its end point, where I enjoyed a spectacular view of the holy mountain. Later I learned I had walked a funerary path, that the Map of the Sacred Road is actually an ancient Naxi religious banner that was once displayed on the hillside during temple festivals. The sacred path is covered now in concrete and a bad paint job, the revered relic locked away in a government warehouse.

Gallery Four: Change

78 Temple and basketball court, Shangri La, Tibet (Yunnan, China), 2006. The Chinese authorities renamed the Tibetan town of Gyeltang Shangri La when they developed it for tourism based on the fictive valley described in James Hilton's 1933 novel *The Lost Horizon.* It is not surprising, then, that the place should be filled with incongruous sights—a giant prayer wheel being used as carnival ride, a basketball court occupying a former temple plaza, Tibetan deities carved into Han-like countenances—for these simply are the logical outcomes of worlds in a state of geographical collision.

80 Café at Bodhnath Stupa, Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, 2008. The Bodhnath Stupa was erected in the fourteenth century amid rice fields and stucco and thatch villages in the Kathmandu Valley. In 1959 Tibetan refugees began settling in the area, and soon Bodhnath became a center of Tibetan Buddhism. In 1979 the stupa was declared a United Nations World Heritage Site. At forty meters high and one hundred meters in diameter, Bodhnath maintained its commanding presence over the valley until Kathmandu's urban explosion engulfed the site. The impressive stupa now sits amid a confusing landscape of faith, commerce, and the general hustle and bustle of city life.

81 Potala Palace, Lhasa, Tibet, 2010. The striking architecture of

the Potala Palace, former residence of the Dalai Lama, makes it one of the most recognized buildings in the world. Constructed in 637 CE, the palace sits atop Marpo Ri, or Red Hill, overlooking Lhasa. The growth of the city in recent years, fueled by an influx of Han migrants from coastal China, has transformed the urban landscape, so that the palace now competes for its place on the skyline with high-rise hotels, cell towers, and new apartment buildings sprouting rooftop satellite dishes, solar panels, and lines of laundry set to dry in the sun.

82 Urban hipsters, Kathesimbhu Stupa, Kathmandu, Nepal, 2008. Located near the tourist center of Thamel is the Kathesimbhu Stupa, one of the nicest courtyard temples in Kathmandu. It's easy to miss, though, amid the busy marketplace. Inside the plaza is a gleaming stupa encircled by shrines draped with flapping prayer flags. Local youth frequent its teashops. It was heartening for me to see them seated there among the ancient monuments, drinking tea and joking with a café proprietor. They usually made a quick circumambulation of the stupa before getting back on their motorbikes and speeding off to work or school.

83 Seven monks, Wara Monastery, Chamdo, Tibet, 2006. I was anxious when I crossed from Sichuan Province to the Tibet Autonomous Region because I didn't have the proper paperwork. I hid in the back of a jeep and crossed a river near Chamdo, where the Chinese army had first invaded Tibet in 1950. The monks living in the nearby Wara Monastery were on the front lines of that initial military invasion. More than a half century later, the monastery remains closely monitored by authorities, who are concerned about the monks' involvement in recent civil protests in the region.

84 Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, 2008. Geology and mythology mix freely in the Kathmandu Valley. Legend holds the seismic depression to have once been a lake emptied by the sword of the Tibetan saint Manjushree. Humans began settling in the valley more than two millennia ago—farmers tilled the soil, rulers came and went, minor markets became mercantile centers, and priests and artisans built magnificent temples and monasteries. Kathmandu nowadays is a sprawling and chaotic metropolis, filled with ancient shrines and courtyards that serve as sacred eddies in the mainstream of city life.

85 Ranamuktaswore Temple, Kathmandu, Nepal, 2008. The Ranamuktaswore Temple doesn't appear on maps of Kathmandu, nor can its shining white dome be seen from the city streets. It occupies a hidden courtyard behind a smelly fish market. I walked up a flight of steps to the roof of an office building and looked down upon the temple. Its symmetry and ornamentation are exquisite. The scale, though, is somehow odd. Set amid blocky concrete buildings, the temple has the misplaced look of an architectural cast-off from another time and place.

86 Maitreya Buddha, Thikse Gompa, Ladakh, India, 2004. A multistoried chapel in the Thikse Monastery houses a fifteen-meter likeness of Maitreya—the future Buddha. It is the largest such statue in Ladakh and made of clay, gold, and copper, adorned with a jeweled headdress. The Maitreya denotes loving-kindness and refers specifically to the compassionate dharma that will be taught by a Buddha in the near future. The message of the Maitreya is a universal one of knowledge, dissolution, and the inevitability of change.

87 Singh Gompa, Nepal, 2008. The Singh Gompa Monastery rests on a ridge at 3,250 meters elevation above the Yolmo Valley. In local mythology, Yolmo is a beyul, or hidden valley of sacred wisdom. The 7,246-meter Langtang summit towers above the valley and attracts foreign hikers to the region. A cluster of tin-roofed trekking lodges dominates the scene. Bedsheets and towels were hung out to dry in the sun beneath the prayer flags when I visited, and the old stone *chortens* of the monastery shaded the picnic tables at

the guesthouses. The closed monastery looked abandoned, but the views across the valley were stunning.

88 Monastic ruins, Tibet, 2010. It's almost impossible to find a long vista in Tibet that doesn't include the ruins of a monastery. On the one hand, this gives some idea of just how densely populated the plateau once was with temples and shrines. It's also a striking visual record of the devastation that accompanied the Chinese occupation of Tibet. The ruins in the landscape appear ancient when most of them date only to the 1960s. It is one thing when old places slowly succumb to natural forces, but quite another when they suffer the effects of aerial bombings and artillery practice.

89 Temple restoration workers, Derge, Tibet (Sichuan, China), 2006. Tibet hosted more than six thousand monasteries before 1959. The Chinese demolitions reduced the number to less than fifteen hundred, and many of the standing temples were severely disfigured. Temple restorations now taking place are financed by local communities and international philanthropic foundations. The Chinese authorities allow the renovations but maintain strict control over them, which according to government policies must be overseen by "patriotic monks and nuns."

90 Nine novice monks, Choglamsar, Ladakh, India, 2004. Refugee settlements were established in Ladakh to serve the Tibetans who crossed the Himalaya Mountains to escape Chinese persecution in their homeland. A camp in Choglamsar was set up for orphan children, and a few of its boys joined the local monastery as novice monks. They posed for me against a temple wall. As I peered at them through the lens of my camera, I saw in their countenances not the despair I thought I might encounter but rather expressions of pluck and determination set amid the changing circumstances of their young lives.

91 Monk, Dargye Monastery (Dajin Su), Tibet, 2004. Before the Chinese invasion of Tibet, the Dargye Monastery was a vibrant center of the Gelukpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism, with thirty-seven hundred resident monks and lively prayer chambers. It now sprawls mainly empty and much destroyed across a hillside in eastern Tibet. Most of its clergy were killed or sent to rehabilitation centers, and its altar relics were stolen or destroyed. I met an elderly monk seated quietly on the doorstep of a ruined building, apparently lost in thought, and I could only imagine the things he might have witnessed during his lifetime.

92 Festival grounds, Damxung, Tibet, 2010. An empty gateway frames the sacred peaks of the Nyenchen Tanglha Range near the Damxung crossroads. Opposite the gate is a town built by the Chinese authorities to serve the traffic that moves along the Golmud-Lhasa road. It is a bleak and windy place, filled with barrackslike structures where truckers halt for gasoline, food, or a cheap place to sleep. There is no soul to the new town—no central place, no temples, no shrines or cozy courtyards, and no reason for Tibetans to visit it other than on an occasion in the religious calendar, when an important festival occurs in the gated grounds at the base of the holy mountains.

93 Thulo Syabru, Nepal, 2008. The small village of Thulo Syabru lies on an old pilgrimage path that is used in August by shamans heading to a full-moon ritual high in the mountains. It also serves foreigners hiking into the region during the fall and spring trekking months. Many of its youth have left the village for jobs in faraway places like Kathmandu, Dubai, New Delhi, or Kuala Lumpur. Thulo Syabru appeared to me to have lost its traditional way among the polyglot signs proclaiming a new and perplexing mix of people and intentions.

95 Prayer wheels (spiritual technology), Mustang, Nepal, 2008.

Metal cylinders on a spindle, stamped with a mantra and filled with ritual items, are turned by Tibetan Buddhists in acts of worship. The prayer devices take various forms: handheld wheels, wheels in a stream turned by flowing water, wind- and sunshine-driven wheels, electric wheels, and nowadays, digital prayer wheels attached to a computer hard drive. Like others, I found it difficult to pass a row of prayer wheels and not give them a reverent spin. It makes no difference if one's mind is distracted or the gesture tentative; the act itself is believed to be meritorious enough when done with an open heart.

96 Kali shrine, Rishikesh, India, 2004. The forests above the holy town of Rishikesh are filled with shrines and meditation caves. I came across an altar dedicated to Kali, who is revered by Hindus as a tantric goddess—mistress of time and change, demoness, and the mythological consort of Shiva. The forest deity is depicted in a necklace of human skulls standing triumphantly atop Shiva's prone body. In tantric practice, Kali signifies both annihilation and redemption, and the altar attracts yogins from throughout India who come to the forest to meditate on her contradictory qualities.

97 Burial shrine, Khumbu, Nepal, 2004. A shrine on a ridge above the Bhote Kosi Valley commemorates a local youth who died fighting in a foreign war. The sacred geography of Tibet and the Himalaya has gone global: the mountaintop shrine was financed by Sherpa taxi drivers living in New York City. Meanwhile, Hindu priests consecrate new Himalayan ashrams for an international clientele; Tibetan clergy jet-set freely among study centers located in Paris, New York, or London; swamis from India run meditation retreats in the European countryside; and tourists from around the world visit sacred places in the mountains on journeys that may take them to the distant horizons of their geographical imagination.

99 Ruins, Pashupatinath Temple, Nepal, 2004. Straddling the Bagmati River in the Kathmandu Valley is the sixteen-hundred-year-old Pashupatinath Temple, thought to be one of the most sacred places in the world devoted to the Hindu deity Shiva. The temple complex is filled with golden-roofed pagodas, smoking *ghats,* and carved-stone shrines. It is always a busy scene by the river, and I found myself drawn to the forest above the temple, where the old buildings were disappearing amid rotten timbers, vines, and crumbling stone—the architectural saga of an ancient faith slowly dissolving back into the quiet woodlands.

100 Mt. Kailash, Tibet, 2013. The sacred center of the world mandala for Himalayan pilgrims is the 6,714-meter summit of Mt. Kailash—mythological Mt. Meru, the *axis mundi* connecting heaven and Earth. Hindus believe it to be the abode of Shiva. Tibetan Buddhists consider it the topographic manifestation of compassion and goodness. For Bonpos, it is the mystic soul of the universe. A ritual circumambulation of the mountain is thought to wipe out the sins of a lifetime. The sacred mountain straddles the divide between India and China as it towers over the headwaters of several great Asian rivers, including the Indus and Brahmaputra. It is the final place I visited for my Sacred Geography series and the first I photographed with a digital camera, thus rendering its divine image in a pixelated form.

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