

## Crossing the Knife Edge – Mt. Katahdin

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by Chi S. Chan

“The wind must be blowing at least 40 miles per hour”, George was protesting the almost unbearable gust of wind hitting five of us at the top of Pamola. Sandy was the first one climbing down to the Chimney. George was right behind me getting impatient of my slow movement around the clefts. Mr. Chen also inched his way forward along the ledge of the rock wall. Ray, on the other hand, was nowhere to be found. “I have to take you to do some rock climbing, Chi!” George finally climbed past me and continued down to the bottom of the steep cliff.



Wednesday morning, the sky finally cleared up, with plenty of sun but gusting wind. We were very excited to be able to climb Mt. Katahdin and its infamous Knife Edge after being delayed by the rain Monday morning. Due to the limited parking space on the trailhead, only the first 26 cars are allowed to enter into the parking lot. Once the parking lot is full, the trail is closed for the day. We got up 4:14am that morning and after an hour's drive, arrived at the gate by 6:00am. The parking lot was already half filled with cars. We quickly ate our breakfast, headed towards the Roaring Brook Campground, and began our climb via the Helon Taylor trail.

The trail climbs moderately up a minor wooded peak, descends into a minor col, and then heads steeply up the ridge towards Pamola Peak. The trail is a steep ascent straight up to the peak with full exposure. The views at the top of Pamola were tremendous, with views north toward the Maine wilderness, south toward the Penobscot, and east to the coast. At the summit, we stood at the brink of the great South Basin of Katahdin. Baxter Peak, the main summit, was visible from the distance. The steep cliffs that form the Chimney and the wall of Knife Edge were 1.1 mile long jutting out like the back of a dragon in front of us.

After a brief rest on the Pamola summit, we followed the trail toward the Chimney. This formation is a narrow cleft in the ridge-top capping a steep, chute-like gully that plunge down into the basin. The trail passes down into and then up out of this cleft, with only natural handholds available. Although the view into the Chimney cleft itself is spectacular but the climb is somewhat frightening considering the exposure.

“Sorry, I have short legs!” I always blame my pair of short legs that hinder my ability to climb well. I let George pass me and with much effort, finally reached a safe place where I could reassess my strategy. Looking back, I saw Mr. Chen having the same difficulty climbing down. I turned to George and Sandy's direction and they already maneuvered their way out of the Chimney and headed towards the Knife Edge. I began to move forward, but something stopped me. Looking up to where Mr. Chen was, I turned back and called out to Mr. Chen through the howling wind.

“Mr. Chen, place your right foot here!” I held on Mr. Chen right foot and guided him until he safely reached the level ground. Mr. Chen’s feet were trembling and I could sense the fear in him. From that moment on, I gave up the idea to catch up with George and Sandy and decided to stay with Mr. Chen. I wanted to cross the Knife Edge with him.

Both Mr. Chen and George are my inspiration to be what I am today. After George got married, Mr. Chen and I shared a lot of hiking time together. Two days before this hike, Mr. Chen fell and hurt both his arms and legs. He had some pain and the injury affected his ability to hike fast. His progress was slow but I did not mind waiting for him. Perhaps it was out of respect, maybe it was a sense of duty, whatever it was, I knew I should stay with him. As soon as we both reached the bottom of the cliff, we saw Ray appear on the same difficult spot. He was just sitting there. Mr. Chen told him, we would wait for him, but he just waved us to go on without him. That was the last time we saw him alive!



Once past the Chimney, Mr. Chen and I headed out onto the Knife Edge. Every year, thousand of people come here to accept this challenge hike. The trail snakes along the north side of the ridge with just enough footing for single-file passage. At some points, the trail is only two to three feet wide, and is full with loose, often tilted, rock slabs. With wind gusting 20-40 miles per hours, we had to stop constantly,

crouching down on our knees, sheltering ourselves between rocks to avoid being blown off the mountain. The hike required such a high concentration that I hardly remembered doing anything except focusing on what was immediately in front of me. Every ten steps, I looked back to ensure Mr. Chen was behind me. Not far from us, a young man with tall and lean figure was hopping from rocks to rocks. Every so often, he stopped and looked back to an elderly person. Judging from his concern, the man behind him must be his father. Later I passed them while they were having a break, they both gave me a warm greeting. The old man must be at his 60’s but his face was so warm and full of energy. His silver grey hair was fluttering in the wind; his rosy cheek glowed as he looked to his son. I thought of my own parent whom I have been neglecting all these years, my eyes blurred wetly with hot tears. My surrounding was quiet with only the sound of a howling wind. I looked at Mr. Chen again and let him get closer to me. His hiking poles were in his way and I took them away from him, perhaps just to ease some of my guilty feeling.... I don’t know.

Lastly we came to the end of the Knife Edge. The most difficult part of the hike was nearly over and a sense of accomplishment overcame me. The 1.1 miles long cliff took us nearly 2 hours to cross. George is right; this hike is definitely not for everyone from CMCNY.

When we finally united with Sandy and George at the summit of Baxter Peak, we were rewarded with fantastic views. Looming a mile above the northern Maine wilderness, Katahdin (meaning “sacred” or “greatest mountain”) stands as a majestic monument to nature. The 360-degree views extend as far as where the sky meets the earth. The view is so extensive that you can actually see the curve of the earth in the limitless horizon. Below us are meadows, swamps, cascades, sparkling lakes, river valleys, and forests. In front of us are cliffs, boulders, serrated ridges, and deep glacial cirques. This is the best part about climbing mountain. The higher you climb, the better view you have.



Four of us stayed at the summit for an hour to have our well-earned lunch. Ray, meanwhile, was still missing. We started to worry about him. Mr. Chen suggested waiting for him a little longer. When Ray still did not show up half hour later, we decided to leave the summit.

We yet had a long hike ahead to reach our second summit: the Hamlin Peak. Climbing down through Hamlin Ridge was another challenge. On our way down, a rescues helicopter flew towards the Baxter peak and disappeared onto the Knife Edge. We immediately thought of Ray. Mr. Chen asked us to pray for him. “Come back safe Ray, at least do that, and forget about the summit,” I whispered to the now silent hills. Back in my mind, I knew, Ray would be okay. He is an experienced hiker and he is also intelligent enough to get himself out of the mountain safely. The 11 miles hike took us nearly 10 hours to finish. At the parking lot, we were all very tired and hungry. Ray showed up half hour later. He did not say much about his hike and we were just glad to see him in one piece.

The Knife Edge has its excitement and novelty. I am thrilled to be able to cross it. As I always believe, each mountain has its own God and so long as you pay your respect, the mountain will always be a safe place to visit. As for George, he is definitely back after retiring nearly 4 years. Both Sandy and I are looking forward to George’s next adventure: the Banff!