



Magic and Mystery in Tibet

Alexandra David-Néel , A. D'Arsonval (Introduction)

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Seeker, adventurer, pilgrim, and scholar, David-Neel (1868-1969) was the first European woman to explore the once-forbidden city of Lhasa. This memoir offers an objective account of the supernatural events she witnessed during the 1920s among the mystics and hermits of Tibet - including levitation, telepathy, and the ability to walk on water. Includes 32 photographs.

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Anton Channing says

I came across this book as part of my research into the concept of a 'tulpa' from Tibetan mysticism, this being a kind of thought-form so intensely visualised by the sorcerer that both the sorcerer and others experience the thought-form as solid, possibly even mistaking it for a real person. David-Neel was apparently the first European author to write of the concept after spending many years in Tibet during a time when it was supposedly closed to Europeans, ignoring several instructions for her to leave and often travelling in disguise so as to avoid deportation.

Unaware of the author before I had no idea what to expect, but subconsciously I feared this might end up a little 'new age' and sensationalist. What I found however was an author who remained casually sceptical of the more outlandish explanations of the phenomena described yet open to the scientific, anthropological and psychological implications of the fact that a culture can when constructed in such a way, foster such phenomena in such a way that they take on such solid experiential reality.

Thus she cleverly avoids both the trap of your average skeptic of merely dismissing these experiences as hallucinations and the trap of the new age believer ready to take on board any mystical reality as absolute truth. Perhaps as result she provides us with an illuminating, grounded tale of her travels and experiences with lamas, monks and sorcerers of Tibet from the early 20th century and their practises as she witnessed them.

Irene says

This book is a trip. It reads more like a manual than a memoir. Very technical regarding exactly how to perform certain mystical workings or magick spells.

Sophie says

Certainly the biggest woman traveller of the last century!

Pierre Mercier says

It is great in the sense that she gives a insight into the roots of Buddhism in Tibet which are strongly tied to Hindu Tantric practices and Shamanistic beliefs from Tibetan tribes which exists way back before the existence of Tibet. A funny quote is that the love of fermented beer or chang by Tibetans is linked to their Supreme Guru, Padmasambhava (the supreme magician sorcerer)whose true historical verifiable details of his life or lives.... are hard to check and abound in epic legends.....

Happydog says

Absorbing view of Tibetan Buddhism as it was practiced in the very early 20th century. Although David-Neel is a product of her time, and this book is definitely not objective, what she was writing about is almost opposite to the cerebral image that Buddhism projects now.

This particular translation from the French is rather old-fashioned and sometimes difficult to read, which is complicated by David-Neel's bad case of cultural superiority. It is quite evident that she perceives the Tibetans as less advanced and more superstitious than herself. She also seems to regard Tibetan Buddhism as inferior to the Mahayana-styled Buddhism she apparently practiced. However, if you read between the lines, there is a sense that she encountered something there that she has no explanation for. Several times she states diffidently that she had some experiences there that definitely do not fit her worldview, although she does not state what they were. This is tantalizing but frustrating.

Overall the book is worth reading if you have an interest in shamanism, magic, or Tibetan Buddhism as it was practiced at the beginning of the 20th century. Our view of Tibetan Buddhism is very much influenced by the current Dalai Lama, a genuinely spiritual man. The Dalai Lama of David-Neel's day was a political figure presiding over a very troubled land where sometimes corrupt lamas held political, social, and economic power that was often misused. As a result, Tibetan Buddhism was neither unified nor standardized, and the essentially shamanic, magical nature of the Tibetan Buddhism of that day is a fascinating contrast to modern-day Tibetan Buddhism. The Buddhism of this book contrasts even more sharply with the versions of Mahayanist Buddhism often taught in the West.

Tibetan Buddhism in the early part of the 20th century, at least according to David-Neel, was harsh, unsympathetic, sometimes quite corrupt, often quite bizarre, but darkly magical and fiercely alive - something that cannot always be said for the current version of Buddhism practiced in the West. This view of Buddhism makes the book worth reading in spite of the imperialist tone and the antiquated phraseology.

Marsha Altman says

This is Alexandra David-Neel's account of various mystical traditions she encountered while traveling in Tibet during the reign of the 13th Dalai Lama. While her other books focus on how she came to be on these long journeys and how she disguised herself to get into Lhasa, this one focuses on magicians, mystics, and lamaist traditions she discovered during her research. She tries to maintain a healthy air of skepticism concerning the stories she is told, but eventually is drawn in by a few different events in her travels that she cannot explain through since, like her several encounters with magical adepts proficient in "speed walking."

This book is a wealth of information about pre-invasion Tibet, even if a lot of it is stories of events long past that, with our modern understanding of science, could not possibly be true.

Mike S says

The author lived in or near Tibet for over a decade, walked across the country several times, spoke with everyone and anyone about all sorts of mystical topics, and meditated enough to have her own experiences as well as earning respect and having a reputation as someone worthwhile to talk with. This is a must read for

anyone interested in the mystical side of Tibet.

Emily says

This is my favorite kind of non-fiction - a perfect example of truth being stranger than fiction. It's fascinating, obscure, a little whacky and off-beat. I love books like this.

Owlseyes says

She had the drive.

Alex studied Buddhism at the Sorbonne.

(...)

Then she headed towards Lassa, Tibet. She had great questions to answer to; she was, indeed, a great questioner; she gave also great answers while living. Yet, there are some instances of her thought I still don't understand.

She spent 14 years in Tibet (in fact, the 1st western woman to do so) and had a great work of translating, from the Sanskrit, the original texts.

A soprano voice, Alex marveled men, and scholars. She met with Indian sages and discussed with them. She liked philosophizing ("her nature").

In 1911 she was stationed in Pondicherry and she was affirming: "Be yourself your own light"--very Buddhist.

She met with Aurobindo who told her about the 3rd beatitude: it's the "renunciation of ambitions,...desire".

In another instance she said: "Ni dieu, ni maitre" :(no need for) neither God, nor a master, like my father exiled in Brussels,... with Victor Hugo.

"Je suis anarchiste". I am an anarchist.

But her driving-force, was this magnus question: the 3rd beatitude of the Bhagavad Gita (the way of the

yoga); she questioned several people about it. She wanted the Nirvana.

She wrote about the 3rd beatitude: common to Buddhists of the north and Hindus (Vedanta).

In Sikkim (1912) she met with the XIII Dalai Lama (China had invaded Tibet). He offered her several gifts; one of great import: Milarepa's poetry, Alex wanted so much to translate.
She arrived to Lassa in 1924.

-How come she said “the Dharma theory is socialist and feminist”?

-Why some people (philosopher Catherine Clément) say she was an atheist?

Later in life, already 100 years old, she was asked about Yoga. She replied: it's an "intellectual... philosophy",... but also the “suppression of cogitation”*.

-Therefore, no need for philosophy?

“Je pense comme le Buddha”

I think like the Buddha.

*<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LAbix8...>

Delia says

I was utterly enthralled by this book when I read it a few years after David-Neel's death. I haven't re-read it in the intervening decades so my impressions are those of a much younger me. What I can say with confidence is that David-Neel must have been incredibly strong both physically and mentally to undertake her historic journey and incredibly courageous in the face of danger from many quarters from natural to man-made. I had no knowledge of the ancient Bon tradition prior to reading Magic and Mystery in Tibet but what I have read since then confirms much of David-Neel's reportage. Her travels were undertaken in the age of Gurjieff and Ouspensky and the artist Nicholas Roerich, a time of spiritual seeking and anthropological exploration of the few remaining isolated cultures of the world. As such, Magic and Mystery in Tibet is a valuable introduction to the "hidden worlds" - at least hidden from western eyes - that we still crave today.

George Ilsley says

Read this one years ago. Not sure how much of it is actually true. Some of it might be, but my BS detector is pretty active when reading this author.

The writing is a strange mixture of learning and bombast. The author seems to have missed any buddhist teachings on ego. For example (and this happens over and over), she will meet some high lama, and after he

questions her a bit, she will assert that he then completely accepts that she is highly learned. Everyone is dazzled by me! I am so perfectly wonderful!

OK, now I've finished the re-read. The text is most annoying near the beginning, and most opaque near the end. I've never seen this text referenced by modern buddhist teachers, yet it has a certain ineffable charm.

Ruta Sevo says

You might need an academic interest to read this story of the strangest beliefs and practices revealed by a Victorian woman who became a Tibetan Buddhist nun and learned the Tibetan language to do it. She wrote thirty books in her lifetime. An amazing, unreal bio.

Julie says

Just finished this book. I love travel books and this certainly qualifies. No one today going to Tibet could have such experiences and in this book, she shares some of her more amazing encounters and experiences.

Hayden Chance says

Fascinating look at the real Tibet and the influence the ancient Bon had and still still have on that area. Neel penetrated the country and learned secrets that very few outsiders were privileged to see and she did it at time when women were not "allowed" to do such things.

Vanessa Glau says

Fascinating account of Tibet with its manifold Buddhist and spiritual practices. David-Neel visited it in the early 19th century, when much of the country's old culture and traditions were still intact and in practice. This book seems to be a classic of Tibet studies - to be honest, I expected more tales about her travels and personal experiences, but her descriptions of the workings of monasteries, lamaist practices and mental exercises, phenomena concerning gods and demons proved to be just as interesting to me. One should keep in mind the time during which this book was researched and written though, political correctness or serious scientific research into extrasensory perception will not be found in it. Nevertheless it is an important as well as entertaining read about Tibet and its unique Buddhist and traditional culture.
