

Alexandra David-Néel: The Life and Work of an Early Romancer of Tibet

Iván Kovács



*I belong to a new breed. We are few in number but we will accomplish our mission.
I am doing what I must.*¹
Alexandra David-Néel

*I have seen the world, and more than the world:
I have studied the heart of man,
And now I consort with Immortals. The fruit of my tree of knowledge is plucked,
And it is this, 'ADVENTURES ARE TO THE ADVENTUROUS.'*²
Benjamin Disraeli: *Ixion in Heaven, II. ii.*

Abstract

This Article deals with the explorer and Tibetologist, Alexandra David-Néel. The introduction gives a brief overview of earlier attempts by Europeans to enter and explore Tibet and includes a section on the Hungarian Orientalist, Sándor Csoma de Kőrös, who is considered to be the founder of Tibetology. Next Alexandra David-Néel is treated, first from a biographical point of view, then in her capacity as a writer. Two of her books are discussed in some detail, firstly, *Magic & Mystery in Tibet*, then *The Secret Oral Teachings in Tibetan Buddhist Sects*.

Introduction

Before proceeding with the main subject of this article, namely the life and work of Alexandra David-Néel, it is appropriate to

write a few words about earlier attempts by Europeans to enter and explore Tibet.

The first documented claim by a European to have visited Tibet came from a Franciscan called Odoric of Pordenone, who supposedly traveled through Tibet in about 1325.³ It would take another three hundred years for two Portuguese Jesuit missionaries, António de Andrade and Manuel Marques, to arrive in

About the Author

Iván Kovács is qualified as a fine artist. As a writer, he has published art criticism, short stories and poems, and more recently, articles of an esoteric nature. He is a reader of the classics and modern classics, a lover of world cinema, as well as classical and contemporary music. His lifelong interest in Esotericism was rounded off with several years of intensive study with the Arcane School.

Tibet. The result of their efforts was the establishment of two missions, one in Tsaparang in 1625, the other in Shigatse in 1628. Due, however, to the fact that the two missions became embroiled in the rivalry between the Red Hat or Niyingma Sect and the Yellow Hat or Gelugpa Sect (two different branches of Tibetan Buddhism); both missions were evacuated in 1635.⁴

Twenty-five years later, in 1661, two Jesuits, Johannes Grueber and Albert Dorville set out from Peking, and traveled through Tibet by way of Lhasa to Agra, India. The success of this achievement was largely due to the fact that they were traveling on an Imperial Passport.⁵

In the 18th century, there were several Jesuits and Capuchins from Europe that entered Tibet, and the most important of these was Ippolito Desideri, an Italian Jesuit. He left Rome with the sanction of Pope Clement XI and arrived in Lhasa in 1716. Desideri undertook various journeys between 1716 and 1721 that encompassed a circuit of the Tibetan borders with Nepal, and what is now known as modern-day Kashmir and Pakistan. During the next twenty-five years, the Capuchins became the sole missionaries in Tibet, but they met increased opposition from the Tibetan lamas, and were finally expelled from Tibet in 1745.⁶

Another enterprising traveler to Tibet was Sándor Csoma de Kőrös (27 March 1784 – 11 April 1842), a Hungarian philologist and Orientalist. He was born in Kőrös, Transylvania, Kingdom of Hungary, into the Hungarian ethnic group of Széklers, who traced their origins to Attila's Huns who had settled in Transylvania in the 5th century. It is this claim of the Széklers that motivated Csoma to investigate and attempt to trace the place of origin of his ancestors. In 1820, he set off to Asia, where he achieved his life's task by studying the Tibetan language and Buddhist philosophy. Being the author of three important books about the Tibetan language entitled *Essays Towards a Dictionary, Tibetan and English; Grammar of the Tibetan Language*, and *Sanskrit-Tibetan-English Vocabulary: Being an Edition and Translation of the Mahavyutpatti*, Csoma is considered the founder of Tibetology. Alt-

hough his travels in Tibet took him no further than Zanskar in the west, he had the privilege of studying under a lama for an initial sixteen-month period. This made him the first European to master the Tibetan language. Once his dictionary and grammar were complete, Csoma went to Calcutta in India to oversee its publication. To do justice to his character and achievements it needs to be mentioned that Csoma not only gained the respect of the Tibetans, but also that of the British, who unanimously elected him as an honorary member of the Asiatic Society in 1833. Furthermore, on February 22, 1933, Csoma was declared as a Bodhisattva (canonized as a Buddhist saint) by the Japanese.⁷

In the 19th century, Tibet was caught up in the power struggle between the British and the Russian Empires. On the one hand, the British were encroaching from northern India into the Himalayas and Afghanistan, on the other, tsarist Russia was expanding south into Central Asia. Both powers became suspicious of the other's intent in Tibet, a country which neither knew anything about. Tibet, which was equally ignorant about Britain and Russia, however, had a longstanding relationship with China. China claimed Tibet as a protectorate, and Tibet in its turn was easily persuaded by this neighbor to believe that foreigners who entered Tibet threatened its gold fields as well as its established religious faith of Buddhism. Consequently, by 1850, all foreigners were banned from the country, and borders were shut to all except nationals of neighboring countries.⁸

In 1904, the Anglo-Russian conflict over Tibet came to a head when a military expedition led by Colonel Francis Younghusband forcefully entered Tibet and advanced to Lhasa, killing hundreds of Tibetan soldiers in the process. The British imposed a treaty on the Tibetans which stipulated that Tibet remain closed to all foreigners except themselves. They left a political representative, Sir Charles Bell, behind who developed an interest in Tibetology and also became an advisor and intimate friend of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama.⁹

Despite the above prohibitions, Tibet kept on attracting other explorers and adventurers, both male and female. One of the most daring and

enterprising women to illegally enter Tibet, and then to achieve the exclusive feat of becoming the first European woman ever to enter Lhasa, was Alexandra David-Néel.¹⁰ It is to her that this article pays tribute.

Alexandra David-Néel: Her Life A Turbulent Childhood and a Horizon of Dreams

Even before taking up the narrative of Alexandra David-Néel, the somewhat unrealistic expectations of her parents before she was born need to be mentioned. Louis David, who was to become her father, didn't want children at all, while her mother, Alexandrine, longed to bear a son who would one day miraculously rise through the ranks of her beloved Catholic Church and attain the office of at least a bishop. Thus, the birth of a daughter in the Belgian-French David family in Saint-Mandé, France on 24 October 1868¹¹ did not bring about the happy result that the birth of a son would have done. Yet the fact had to be accepted and three days later she was baptized Louise Eugénie Alexandrine Marie David. Her father was a publisher, and a friend of the novelist Victor Hugo. The well-known Neoclassical artist Jacques-Louis David was a distant relation of hers.¹²

Already as a young child she was strong-willed and longed for a life of freedom and adventure. A first indication of this was when she ran away from home at the age of five. After a lengthy search, she was found by a gendarme, who marched her off to a police station, and whom she had scratched for his trouble.¹³

Unlike other young girls of her age, who at most might have been reading innocent romances and suitable selections of poetry, David-Néel preferred the excitement and high adventure of Jules Verne's science-fiction novels. It was the heroes of these books whom she admired and who became her role models, and it was her ambition that one day she would not only imitate them, but actually outdo them.¹⁴

By the age of fifteen, her taste in books had taken a new turn and also included the occult.

This was partly due to an English journal produced by the Society of the Supreme Gnosis, which was situated in London, and the person responsible for forwarding her this type of reading matter was the English occultist, Elisabeth Morgan. The journal treated a variety of cryptic subjects, such as zymology (the chemistry of fermentation and enzymes), and ancient languages, including fragments of Sanskrit, which both perplexed and fascinated David-Néel.¹⁵

While the David's were vacationing at the seaside city of Ostend in Belgium, David-Néel decided to seek answers to her questions in person. She hiked into Holland and then crossed the English Channel. Arriving in London, she sought out Elisabeth Morgan, but the older woman insisted that David-Néel return to her parents in Belgium. She was to repeat such daring and solitary undertakings. On her next adventure, she traveled by train to Switzerland and then hiked alone through the Alps via the St. Gotthard Pass into Italy and the North Italian lake country. Soon running out of money, she swallowed her pride and wired home for help, giving her mother no choice but to go and fetch her.¹⁶

Soon after the above incident David-Néel ran off once more, this time to Spain on a bicycle. After she had satisfied her unique craving, she managed to return to Brussels without any injury to herself. Around this time, in April 1886, she entered the Royal Conservatory and took up music, more specifically, the cultivation of her soprano voice. In 1888, she received a letter from Elisabeth Morgan who offered her a chance to take up the study of mysticism with the Society of the Supreme Gnosis. The society also offered cheap boarding, and David-Néel jumped at the opportunity, setting off for London.¹⁷

At last, David-Néel found herself among people with similar interests. She improved her English and studied arcane subjects of her own choosing. In a well-equipped library, she could pick and choose among subjects such as metaphysics, philosophy, astrology, and alchemy. During David-Néel's stay in London,

Elisabeth Morgan introduced her to some prominent members of the burgeoning occult society. This is how she came to meet Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, cofounder of the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875. While frequenting the Theosophical Society in London, David-Néel became friends with Annie Besant, who would later, after the death of Madame Blavatsky in 1891, become President of the Theosophical Society. By that time, David-Néel herself would become someone to be reckoned with, gaining the status of an explorer of Tibet who would make known its mystical and magical practices.¹⁸

In 1889, David-Néel felt that her stay in London had taught her enough, and decided that it was time to move on. She told her friend, Annie, that she intended to resume her studies of comparative religions in Paris, and Annie arranged for her to get accommodations at the Paris branch of the Theosophical Society. Thus, David-Néel returned to the continent and enrolled at the Collège de France, studying Sanskrit, and attending classes in Oriental languages at the Sorbonne. While in London, she had often frequented the British Museum, now in Paris, she became a regular visitor of the Musée Guimet, a museum that featured Far Eastern art and religious artifacts.¹⁹

One evening a curious incident took place at the Musée Guimet when David-Néel was engrossed in translations of sacred texts in the library. In a niche overlooking her place of study there was a huge Japanese statue of the Buddha that she had grown very fond of. Induced by its presence, and believing herself to be alone, she joined her hands in supplication and bowed to the image. The next moment a woman's voice responded from the shadows:

“May the blessings of the Buddha be with you, mademoiselle.”

This friendly but amused voice was that of the Comtesse de Bréant, a well-known student of Oriental philosophy who also spent long hours at the museum.

“This very beautiful Japanese statue made me think of the great sage it is intended to resem-

ble,” David-Néel responded, “and I salute the doctrine it represents.”²⁰

After this initial exchange, the two women struck up a conversation which led to an instant friendship. And so it happened that just as Elisabeth Morgan had introduced David-Néel to the occult scene in London, her newfound friend now introduced her to the Parisian occult scene. This was how David-Néel came to know the Pythagorean Society, a cultural foundation where she met numerous leading occultists and Orientalists who were living in Paris.²¹

To avoid a lopsided development in her studies, David-Néel also investigated the ideas of Plato and the teachings of the Koran. Before she embraced Buddhism as her preferred philosophy, she also acquainted herself with a variety of religious alternatives, including Hinduism. During this last phase of her formative years, David-Néel was particularly fond of listening to the Comtesse de Bréant, who would vividly describe her travels in Asia. All the while, she was filled with longing to visit places like India, so that she could gain firsthand experience of the wonders of the East, like a true explorer and adventurer.²²

A Dream Becomes Reality

In 1891, when she was twenty-three, David-Néel had an unexpected, but most timely windfall. Her English friend, Elisabeth Morgan, suddenly died. David-Néel had long ago honored Morgan by unofficially referring to her as her godmother, although fairy-godmother would have been even more appropriate, because she had left David-Néel a small inheritance. This inheritance was the magic key that would open the door to her yet unrealized ambitions. The amount proved to be enough to allow David-Néel to travel for more than a year through Ceylon and India.²³

On this first of her major trips to Asia, David-Néel was reunited with Annie Besant, who was now the President of the Theosophical Society, with its headquarters in Adyar, near Madras, in India. During her stay there she studied Sanskrit with them, and then moved on to the holy

city of Benares on the Ganges. Here she studied yoga with the famous guru, Swami Bhaskarananda of Varanasi, who lived in a rose garden. It was also in India where she first heard Tibetan music, which fascinated her. She was however, compelled to return to Brussels when her money ran out.²⁴

Now followed a period when David-Néel tried her hand at a career. From 1894 to 1900, she attempted to work as an actress and singer, but by 1900, her career was going nowhere, and she was forced to accept a job with the municipal opera in Tunis. It was here that she met Philip Néel, a thirty-nine-year-old bachelor who had a successful career as a railway engineer. David-Néel became one of his mistresses, and four years later, on 4th August 1904, they were married, and went to live in a villa at La Goulette next to the Mediterranean Sea. David-Néel's restless nature was, however, not suited to the life of a housewife, and she managed to persuade her husband to allow her to travel again.²⁵

1911 was the year when David-Néel visited India for the second time, and it was also the momentous year that would initiate a 14-year journey. In this year, she also re-visited Ceylon, and paid her respects at the Buddhist pilgrimage site where the "Bo Tree" in Anuradhapura is believed to have been grown from the original fig tree under which the Buddha received his enlightenment in the 5th century BCE. Other major stops of this journey included Mandurai, Pondicherry and Madras. In Mandurai, she visited the fabled Menakshi

Temple and secretly watched highly erotic Tantric rites.²⁶

By 1912, David-Néel had moved on to Calcutta and Benares, and her Sanskrit studies had advanced to such a stage that the College of Sanskrit in Benares awarded her an honorary doctorate of philosophy, a first for a European woman. It was in the same year that she arrived in the small Himalayan state of Sikkim.²⁷ There she enriched her knowledge of Buddhism by visiting all the important monasteries. She also met Prince Sidkeong of Sikkim, and became the first European woman to meet the Dalai Lama, who was there in exile at the time.²⁸ David-Néel formed a romantic relationship with Prince Sidkeong, who introduced her to lamas of both the Red

Hat and Yellow Hat branches of Tibetan Buddhism. She took quickly to the Tibetan culture and its customs.²⁹

David-Néel's audience with the Thirteenth Dalai Lama took place on 15 April, 1912, and he advised her to learn Tibetan.³⁰ She also met another important personage at this time, namely the Gomchen (great hermit) of the monastery of Lachen, and became his disciple. He was an impressive figure who wore a five-sided crown, a rosary necklace made of 108 pieces of human skull, an apron carved of human bone, and a magic dagger. During the next two years, she learned the art of telepathy from him, as well as "tumo breathing," a Tibetan technique of generating body heat to enable one to keep warm in freezing conditions.³¹

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Another person that came into David-Néel's life at this time was a boy of fifteen named Aphur Yongden, who was regarded as a minor *tulku*.³² In Tibetan Buddhism, "tulku" is an honorary title given to a recognized reincarnate lama.³³ She and Aphur Yongden developed a friendship that was to last a lifetime, and eventually David-Néel adopted him as her son.³⁴

In 1916 David-Néel entered Tibet illegally at the invitation of the Panchen Lama, who is the highest-ranking lama after the Dalai Lama, and visited him at his monastery in Shigatse. The British would not tolerate this and expelled her from Sikkim. She and Yongden then left together for Japan.³⁵ From Japan, they travelled to Korea, and then undertook a very difficult journey across the entire width of China, and also journeyed through the Gobi desert and Mongolia. At one stage, before they reached the monastery of Kumbum in Tibet, they were attacked by bandits.³⁶ At Kumbum, David-Néel spent two-and-a-half years, and translated rare manuscripts into French and English. She also observed the magical and psychic exploits of Tibetan adepts.³⁷

In February 1921, David-Néel and Yongden made preparations to penetrate deeper into Tibet and preferably reach the holy city of Lhasa. This ambitious objective, however, took them a full three years to accomplish. As the crow flies, this route was approximately 3,900 miles, but due to unexpected difficulties, which included avoiding interception by officials, much of the journey had to be re-routed. This caused detours that took them as far back as the Gobi desert, from where they returned via Kanchow and Lanchow, south through China, and westwards into southern Tibet. In total the distance they covered was around 8000 miles.³⁸

David-Néel and Yongden finally arrived in Lhasa in February 1924, but David-Néel was somewhat disappointed. Her beggar's disguise didn't allow her to access the intellectual and educational opportunities available; therefore, by April, she and Yongden left Lhasa as unobtrusively as they had arrived. By 1925, the two of them returned to Paris, where they enjoyed huge popularity and success. She started lecturing and also began the systematic procedure

of writing down her experiences both in articles and books.

The Power of Persistence in a Centenarian's Life

In 1928, David-Néel bought a small villa on the outskirts of Digne in southern France and named it "Samten Dzong," which means the "Fortress of Meditation." There, she and Yongden were kept busy with their manuscripts.³⁹ However, in less than a decade, David-Néel became restless, and in 1937, at the age of 70, she and Yongden set off for China via the Trans-Siberian railway, and arrived there to find that China and Japan were at war with each other. Despite these difficulties, they managed to penetrate Tibet again and eventually ended up in Tachienlu, where David-Néel resumed her investigations of Tibetan sacred texts.⁴⁰

The two of them returned to France in 1946. By now, David-Néel was 78 years old. Nine years later Yongden died at the age of 56. David-Néel continued writing and studying until her death in 1969, when she was almost 101 years old. As requested in her last will and testament, her ashes and those of Yongden were mixed together and dispersed in the Ganges in 1973 at Varanasi, by her friend and secretary, Marie-Madeleine Peyronnet.⁴¹ Of all the praise and acknowledgement that she has received from countless quarters, perhaps the most apt is that which came from the novelist and poet Lawrence Durrell, who, after interviewing her in 1965, when David-Néel was 96 years old, stated that she was: "The most astonishing French woman of our time."⁴²

Alexandra David-Néel: Her Books

Magic & Mystery in Tibet

Alexandra David-Néel's most popular and widely read book is undoubtedly *Magic & Mystery in Tibet* which, in its original French version, was first published in 1929, and was soon followed by the first English translation, which was published in England in 1931. About this English publication, Aaron Sussman, editor, and author of the introduction

to the Souvenir Press edition, writes the following: "It was treated politely, but after a yawning interval, it was packed off to limbo. I say this because it did not sell well in England, and I have never seen any references to it, under its British title, (*With Magicians and Mystics in Tibet*), in other books or articles on Tibet."

In America, the book's popularity was an entirely different matter, and Sussman goes on to say: "(It) . . . sold very well indeed, and it has been quoted, or referred to, repeatedly since its publication in 1932."⁴³ A well-earned, and from a publicity point of view, useful windfall came from Margaret Mead, the well-known American anthropologist. Margaret Mead recognized the book's significance as it impacted her own field, and in 1953 reprinted three sections from the book, namely "Running Lamas," "Displacing the Soul" and "Bringing a Corpse to Life," in the anthropological anthology entitled *Primitive Heritage*, which she co-edited with Nicolas Calas.⁴⁴

Before taking a closer look at the actual text of *Magic & Mystery in Tibet*, it is worthwhile quoting the concluding paragraph of Sussman's introduction regarding the extraordinary and revolutionary nature of this truly magical book:

Keep in mind that this book was first published in 1932, five years before J. B. Rhine and the Duke University experiments in extra-sensory perception, 10 years before Edgar Cayce's startling story was told in *There is a River*, and 24 years before the uproar began over *The Search for Bridey Murphy*. It seems to me that our modern world has a long way still to go before it catches up with Lama David-Neel and her friends, mystics and magicians of Tibet.⁴⁵

Just as to some classical music lovers, the composer Anton Bruckner's symphonies can evoke the majesty and purity of the Austrian Alps, likewise, the prose of David-Néel will always be associated with the mysterious, secretive and magical aspects of a bygone and, at the time, as yet only partially explored Tibet. Whether the prospective reader of David-Néel

is interested in adventure, anthropology, foreign religions or esoteric truths, her books have the ability to satisfy on all these aspects equally. The reader who is set on style will also be happy to know that David-Néel's skills in this respect are equally versatile: she writes with a directness which is easily accessible, yet colorful and vividly descriptive, and at times surprisingly beautiful, poetic and lyrical, especially when describing landscapes that form the backdrop of her narrative. To illustrate:

Shrouded in the moving fogs, a fantastic army of trees, draped in livid green moss, seems to keep watch along the narrow tracks, warning or threatening the traveler with enigmatic gestures. From the low valleys buried under the exuberant jungle to the mountain summits covered with eternal snow, the whole country is bathed in occult influences.

In such scenery it is fitting that sorcery should hold sway. The so-called Buddhist population is practically shamanist and a large number of mediums: Bönpos, Pawos, Bunting and Yabas of both sexes, even in the smallest hamlets, transmit the messages of gods, demons and the dead.⁴⁶

In the very first chapter entitled *Tibet and the Lamas*, David-Néel treats a variety of topics. Prominent among these are the people from the local community who act as her servants or interpreters, and also higher dignitaries with whom she interacts on a socially more elevated basis. Among the latter are learned lamas and princes such as His Highness, Sidkeong Namgyal, hereditary prince of Sikkim;⁴⁷ the doctor of philosophy from the famous University of Trashilhumpo, Kushog Chösdzed;⁴⁸ and the highest authority of them all, the Dalai Lama himself.⁴⁹ These people are described in all their pomp, dignity, intellectual capacities, and eccentricities, which not only make for interesting portrayals but also touches of humor and irony.

The second part of the first chapter deals with death and the beyond, a topic about which Tibetan religion seems to know a lot, and which even among the ordinary people has generated

a peculiar array of superstitions and myths. This topic is also the subject matter of the famous *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which was first translated at the instruction of Walter Evans-Wentz into English by Dawasandup, and is the first translated sacred text from the Tibetan language ever to appear in English. Dawasandup was a high school headmaster in Gangtok who not only acted as translator for Walter Evans-Wentz, but was also in the employ of David-Néel, who describes him in humorous, and somewhat less venerated terms than Evans-Wentz.

Concerning the issues of life, death and reincarnation, David-Néel writes that there are numerous subtle theories upon the subject, and that the Tibetan mystics appear to have gained a deeper insight into the question than most other Buddhists. She insists, however, that in Tibet, as elsewhere, the views of the philosophers are understood only by the élite. According to her, the ideas of the Lamaists concerning the condition of a human being immediately after death differs from those held by Buddhists of southern countries such as Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand.

The Lamaists affirm that a certain time elapses between a person's death and his or her rebirth among one or other of the six recognized sentient beings.⁵⁰ The most obvious view held by the majority is that "the class of beings in which one is reborn and the more or less happy conditions in which one is placed among them depends upon the good and evil actions one has accomplished during one's previous existence."⁵¹ However, David-Néel mentions an interesting view held by the lamas, which is at variance with this popular view and about which she writes as follows:

"He who knows how to go about it could live comfortably even in hell" is a very popular saying in Tibet. This explains more clearly than any definition or description all that the lamas mean by thabs, i.e. "method."

Thus, while most of their co-religionists believe that the fate of the dead is mathematically fixed in accordance with their moral

character, the Lamaists declare that he who knows the proper "method" is capable of

modifying for the better his post-mortem fate. They say "as agreeable as possible" because in spite of cleverness, the weight of past actions has considerable force.⁵²

In Lamaism the role of "method" is, in fact, all-important. Lamaists think that after having learned the art of living well, one must also learn the art of dying well, and of "doing well" in other worlds. Initiates who are acquainted with the mystic lore of dying are supposed to know what to expect when they die, and contemplative lamas "have foreseen and experienced, in this life, the sensations that accompany death," thus they have neither fear nor unexpected surprises when they actually die and their personality disintegrates. That which survives by entering conscious into the next world will already know how to orientate itself with that world's roads and bypaths and the places to which they lead.⁵³

"That which survives after death," and what most other esoteric traditions generally accept to be the reincarnating "Ego" or "soul," David-Néel identifies as "consciousness" or "the will to live." According to Tibetans, a mystic initiate is able to enter the after-death state with lucidity and full consciousness. This, however, does not hold true for ordinary mortals, which includes anyone who has not mastered the "science of death," and thus needs the expert help of someone who knows.⁵⁴

The after-death state in Tibetan is known as the *Bardo*, and the *Bardo Thodol* is the Tibetan name for *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. It is a funerary text that is intended to be read to a dead or dying person so that he or she will hear how to find liberation in the intermediate state between death and rebirth, or if that is not possible, to find an auspicious place to reincarnate in, preferably in a land that is characterized by purity.⁵⁵ Although David-Néel does not refer to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* directly, it is obvious from her writing that lamas assisting the dying are using the same methods that are described in this book.

It is interesting to compare what *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* have to say about the first *bardo*, or the stage in the intermediate state which is entered immediately after the dead person becomes disincarnate. The former says the following:

Certain Lamaists assert that, immediately after the spirit has been disincarnated, it has an intuition, fugitive as a streak of lightning, of the Supreme Reality. If it can seize this light, it is definitely set free from the 'round' of successive births and deaths. It has reached the state of nirvana.⁵⁶

Donald S. Lopez, Jr., in his foreword to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, puts the same point in the following way:

The text describes the process of death and rebirth in terms of three intermediate states or "bardos" (bar do, a Tibetan term that literally means "between two"). The first, and briefest, is the bardo of the moment of death ('chi kha'i bar do) when, at the end of a process of sensory dissolution that presages physical death, a profound state of consciousness, called the clear light, dawns. If one is able to recognize the clear light as reality, one immediately achieves liberation from samsāra, the cycle of rebirth. If the clear light is not recognized at that time, the consciousness of the deceased person moves into the second bardo . . .⁵⁷

The *Bardo Thodol* goes on to describe what happens to the dead person if he or she is unable to gain nirvana, or liberation:

(T)he consciousness . . . moves into the second bardo (which appears to be a Tibetan innovation), called the bardo of reality (chos nyid bar do). The disintegration of the personality brought on by death again re-

veals reality, but in this case, not as the clear light, but in the multicoloured forms of a mandala of forty-two peaceful deities and a mandala of fifty-eight wrathful deities . . . If reality is not recognized in this second bardo, then the third bardo, the bardo of mundane existence (srid pa'I bar do), dawns, during which one must again take rebirth in one of the six realms of gods, demigods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, or in hell; consciousness is blown to the appropriate place of rebirth by the winds of past karma.⁵⁸

Although David-Néel makes no direct references to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, she provides interesting information about Ti-

betan funerals and their characteristic culture of death. She even mentions cases where living persons, albeit during states of lethargy or trance, allegedly traveled not only in countries inhabited by men, but paradises, purgatories or in the *Bardo*, and once returned, were able to describe such places. Such people are called *delogs*, a name designating someone who has returned from the beyond.⁵⁹ (Such incidents could be compared to what people have reported after experiencing a near-death experience, as reported by people who were pronounced clinically dead, but then managed to be resuscitated.) There are also strange incidents among the general populace where the spirit of a dead person allegedly gets abducted by a demon, and when people will then employ a *Bön* sorcerer (*Bön* is the ancient shamanistic religion which pre-dated Buddhism in Tibet) to negotiate with the demon, so that the captive can regain his or her liberty. The ransom in such cases is usually the sacrifice of a pig or cow.⁶⁰

. . . while most of their co-religionists believe that the fate of the dead is mathematically fixed in accordance with their moral character, the Lamaists declare that he who knows the proper "method" is capable of modifying for the better his post-mortem fate. They say "as agreeable as possible" because in spite of cleverness, the weight of past actions has considerable force.

Once David-Néel asked the lama of Enche what would be the post-mortem subjective visions of a materialist who had looked upon death as total annihilation. The lama replied that perhaps such a man would see apparitions corresponding to the religious beliefs he held as a child, or to those familiar to him that was held by the people among whom he had lived. Then, according to his degree of understanding and his after-death consciousness, he would, perhaps, pay attention to these visions and remember the reasons which, during his lifetime, made him reject the reality of that which now appears to him. A less intelligent man might, perhaps, see no visions at all, but this will not prevent the workings of the law of karma, or cause and effect, from following its course and resulting in new phenomena. In other words, it will not stop the process of rebirth for the materialist.⁶¹

Before leaving the discussion of *Magic & Mystery in Tibet*, which is highly recommended, it would be worthwhile to quote once more from Aaron Sussman's introduction:

There are many ways to read a book. One can read it as a story, pure and simple, not bothering to figure out its meaning, its purpose, or its warning. One can read it as a record of facts, noting without emotion or involvement the things that were seen, done, felt or thought. But one can also read a book in awe and wonder; wonder at the marvels or insights it reveals, and awe at the way in which it is told. There are not many books which can be read this way.

When I first read the galleys of *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*, I began to feel that same sense of wonder. Here, in our cynical modern age, was a book about the miracles of ancient wisdom.⁶²

The Secret Oral Teachings in Tibetan Buddhist Sects

David-Néel's *The Secret Oral Teachings in Tibetan Buddhist Sects* was co-authored by, and dedicated to, her adoptive son Lama Yongden, and, unlike *Magic & Mystery in Tibet*, is a purely religious and philosophical work. This work only goes to prove how multi-talented and exceptionally intelligent David-

Néel actually was. Her involvement with the depth of philosophical concepts in Tibetan Buddhism is not only that of a curious intellectual, but that of a trained thinker and meditator who has made her own a whole system of thinking that had originally been foreign to her.

The book starts off with a passage where David-Néel relates how she told a learned Tibetan about her intention to write this book, and his less than encouraging response:

“Waste of time. The great majority of readers and hearers are the same all over the world. I have no doubt that the people of your country are like those I have met in China and India, and these latter were just like Tibetans. If you speak to them of profound Truths they yawn, and, if they dare, they leave you, but if you tell them absurd fables they are all eyes and ears. They wish the doctrines preached to them, whether religious, philosophic, or social, to be agreeable, to be consistent with their conceptions, to satisfy their inclinations, in fact that they find themselves in them, and that they feel themselves approved by them.”⁶³

Sadly, the above words are true and universally applicable. Fortunately, David-Néel did not follow this friend's advice, because those people who *do* want to confront philosophical truths and realities would have been all the poorer for it.

The essence of the introductory chapter touches on the method of teaching which takes place between a master and his disciple and is summed up by David-Néel as follows:

The attainment of transcendent insight is the real object of the training advocated in the traditional Oral Teachings, which do not consist, as so many imagine, in teaching certain things to the pupil, in revealing to him certain secrets, but rather in showing him the means to learn them and discover them for himself.⁶⁴

The above method is backed up by the primary recommendation that a Master gives to neophytes, which is *doubt*.⁶⁵ This “doubt” needs to be understood in the same way in which the

Master Djwhal Khul encourages a healthy attitude of skepticism in disciples when they are confronted with occult matters.

The issue of doubt or skepticism is emphasized because our very senses, which are the prime sources of arriving at information when confronting reality, are not to be trusted, and should be considered as minimal and elementary tools whereby we gather information about our surrounding environment. To demonstrate this point, David-Néel uses the example of what might happen when one is in a vast, bare plain, and in the distance, becomes aware of a fleck of green standing out on the yellow sand. Although the fleck of green is ever so tiny, the conclusion one is apt to draw is that one has seen a tree. She says that drawing such a conclusion consists of many elements such as habit, memory, the fact that in similar conditions other green spots have led to the finding of a tree at the end of the plain. Such instances were remembered, and in a general sense one also knows that distance gives a diminutive image of objects seen, and this too has been remembered. Yet all these are *ratiocinations* and not the fact of having *seen* a tree. That one might well find a tree at the end of the plain is quite *probable*, but it is not *certain*.⁶⁶

The whole point of philosophical enquiry is to arrive at some certainties, and thereby come nearer to what is called reality. On the other hand, the above example, when summarized by David-Néel, yields nothing more than the following:

In short, what kind of information has been given us by the fact of having seen a green spot? – It has simply made us conscious of having felt a sensation. A sensation, nothing more, all the rest is interpretation. In the same way, all our perceptions, those to which we give names and assign form, colour, or no matter what attributes, are nothing but interpretations of a fugitive contact by one of our senses with a stimulus.⁶⁷

The conditions of our perceived reality become even more involved and complex when we learn that according to the Masters “*the tangi-*

ble world is movement . . . not a collection of moving objects, but movement itself. There are no objects ‘in movement,’ it is the movement which constitutes the objects which appear to us: they are nothing but movement.”⁶⁸

Expanding on the nature of this movement David-Néel writes that there are two theories, and both consider the world as movement. One states that the course of this movement which creates phenomena is continuous, and can be compared to the flow of a quiet river. The other declares that the movement is intermittent and advances by separate flashes of energy which follow each other at such small intervals that these intervals are almost non-existent.⁶⁹

A practical illustration of the latter theory would be a movie show which by means of light, celluloid, and the rotating movement of the movie projector manages to create the illusion of smooth and continued movement, although we all know that, in reality, we are dealing with numerous separate images which are shown in rapid succession, and by these means successfully manage to create the deception.

Just as our eyes can be subject to deception, all our other organs of perception can be equally deceived. From this one can conclude that any knowledge that has been gained by means of the senses can only be partial and relative, and thus totally inadequate to allow us to form any idea of an Absolute Reality.⁷⁰ Very aptly, at this point, David-Néel asks:

But is there a Reality, a unique Reality in the absolute sense? – What can we know of it and what meaning would it have for us who do not belong to the world of the Absolute but to that of the relative?⁷¹

After this momentous question, she cautions that each type of being, whether it be a mosquito, a plant, a human being, a god or a demon, perceives the world in its own way, and thus the extent, the gradation, the strength, and the nature of the sensations and the perceptions differ according to the constitution of the organ of contact of different beings. We need to understand that our ideas and judgments are based on our human mentality, on our human senses and of relating and gauging according

to our measure that which exists in the infinity of space.⁷²

Once again, the above sampling of this philosophical work only treats a fraction of the whole, as the intention of this discussion is to encourage the reader to do all further investigation for him or herself. In conclusion to this introductory discussion of *The Secret Oral Teachings in Tibetan Buddhist Sects* it is best to quote David-Néel’s own words as she elaborates on the method of presentation of the Oral Teachings:

One can very well apply to the Oral Teachings what has been said above concerning the discontinuity of the movement which is the world. This teaching is not expressed in a consequent and methodically arranged manner, as we might be tempted to wish. The subjects explained are interlaced, repeated, and seen from various points of view. It is rare that a graduated “course” is given to a particular student. The teaching is composed rather of separate interviews often taking place at very long intervals. My observations consist in assembling the summaries of conversations I have heard. Each of my readers must connect together those of these summaries which are most interesting to him.⁷³

Conclusion

Whether one looks at Alexandra David-Néel the adventurer and explorer, the anthropologist, the scholar or the writer, her life is a testimony of an exceptional and highly gifted individual who stopped at nothing to achieve her aims, and in the process left behind a legacy of books, both entertaining and scholarly, that many successive generations will be able to study and enjoy. Although she was not known to have been officially affiliated with any specific occult group in the West, any esoteric school that cares to investigate or research her books as regards the world of the occult could only benefit thereby. Working as a free and independent agent David-Néel’s personality was of such a dynamic and charismatic nature that she befriended people of all types and standing, from the lowliest who acted as her helpers and servants, to high-ranking lamas,

princes, to the Dalai Lama himself. Typical of her adventurous spirit, one can but smile at the fact that when she was a hundred years old, she took definite steps to acquire a new and valid passport. Such spirits can only be hailed with a hearty “*Bon voyage.*”

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