

Magic and Mystery in Tibet:
Discovering the Spiritual Beliefs, Traditions and Customs
of the Tibetan Buddhist Lamas - An Autobiography

Alexandra David-Neel published *Magic and Mystery in Tibet: Discovering the Spiritual Beliefs, Traditions and Customs of the Tibetan Buddhist Lamas - An Autobiography* in 1931 after living in the country for fourteen years. She arrived with a strong knowledge of orthodox Buddhism and it was this that earned her the right to wear the zen robe, which caused her to be respected and taken seriously by the lamas as well as the lay people who marvelled at the apparently rare sight of a female Buddhist monk. Dr. A. D'arsonval, writing in the introduction, states that David-Neel "unites in herself all the physical, moral and intellectual qualities that could be desired in one who is to observe and examine a subject of this kind," and this book makes it evident that she has duly earned his endorsement. Her writings were also an important influence on America's so-called "beat writers" such as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg as well as the later writers Alan Watts, Ram Dass, and Benjamin Creme.

As an autobiography, the book follows David-Neel's experiences travelling through various regions of East Asia. She speaks candidly of the meeting the 13th Dalai Lama, Thubten Gyatso, who held the "conviction that the white race is mentally inferior" to his own, and that prior to her visit, he had "obstinately refused an audience to any woman except Tibetans." He would become embroiled in the Sino-Tibetan War of 1930-1932.

The so-called common people are described as superstitious, largely as a result of their indigenous shamanistic tradition of Bon, yet David-Neel asserts that not all claims to magic and mystery in Tibet are to be easily dismissed. Throughout the text, David-Neel describes many

miraculous occurrences, which the Tibetans themselves regard as the result of psychic phenomena, and she even asserts to having been present to witness several unexplainable events herself. David-Neel presents some of the methods employed by spiritual seekers as they seek spiritual instruction from “tulkus” who are believed to be reincarnated lamas. Surprisingly, David-Neels asserts that the followers of the early Christian docetae sect “looked upon Jesus Christ as being a tulku.” These figures vary widely in every possible way; some are virtuous and public, others are more private as to their motivations and methods.

David-Neel endeavors to make clear her point that Tibetan Buddhism varies widely from what she terms her own “orthodox Buddhism.” Students of Alice A. Bailey, who claimed to have received telepathic instruction from a Tibetan known as Djwhal Khul, will find much hinted at in this little book that is greatly expounded upon in Bailey’s nineteen “blue books.” Yet the emphasis placed on manifestations of power or asceticism and the resulting prestige it affords the lamas, magicians, and sorcerors render Bailey’s theosophy somewhat differently from the Buddhism observed in David-Neel’s text. Compassion, for instance, which is so integral to Alice Bailey’s work, seems to play a much smaller role in the day-to-day affairs of Tibetan monasteries and their eminent lamas, yet this is perhaps due to the social stratification (caste system) they abided by, which as in the West, included lay people, lay nobility, and the clergy.

1. David-Néel, Alexandra. *Magic and Mystery in Tibet: Discovering the Spiritual Beliefs, Traditions and Customs of the Tibetan Buddhist Lamas, an Autobiography*. Pantianos Classics, 1931.

<https://www.amazon.com/Magic-Mystery-Tibet-Discovering-Autobiography/dp/1789871>

506.