Alexandra David-Neel: A Pioneer of Buddhism in France

Lauren Orr
Research Question

- Why did Alexandra David-Neel have such a large impact on the expansion Buddhism in France?
Alexandra’s Early Life

- David-Neel grew up in a wealthy family whose ideals differed from her own.
- She was interested in comparative religion really early on in life.
- She would go on long adventures without telling her parents.
- In Paris she was able to start learning Sanskrit at la Sorbonne and was first introduced to Tibetan Buddhism.
- She learned as much as she could from the Buddhist texts available to her.
Her Journeys

• David-Neel visited many places in her quest to learn more about Buddhism
• She sent to India, Sikkim (where she met The 13th Dalai Lama), Nepal and even southern Tibet all of these leading up to her largest journey into Lhasa in 1924
David-Neel’s Journey to Lhasa

- She disguised herself as a beggar and with the help of her adopted son Yongden made her way across Tibet toward Lhasa
- Along her way she encountered dangerous situations with robbers but also was able to meet people living in the villages who shared their beliefs with her allowing her to bring this knowledge back to France
The Mysticism of Tibet

- David-Neel’s descriptions of Tibet and Buddhist practices added to the level of mysticism already surrounding Tibet
  - “The traveller is left amidst rocks richly embroidered with brightly colored lichens, cold water falls, half frozen lakes and gigantic glaciers...with its distant horizon of peaks bathed in strange mauve and orange hues” (Alexandra David-Neel, My Journey to Lhasa)
In Lhatse, Tibet

Mountain Ridge in Tibetan Yunnan
“the vast edifice scarcely lighted by lamps placed before the magnificent tombs and gilded statues of defunct lamas, the monks were seated motionless, attired in dark-crimson togas” (Alexandra David-Neel, My Journey to Lhasa)
Adding mystery to Buddhist Practices

- In Magic and Mystery in Tibet David-Neel describes various different Buddhist practices in a way that is strange and intriguing but also in a manner that is basic enough it seems approachable
  - “According to popular belief, the class of beings in which one is reborn... depends on the good and evil actions one has accomplished during one's previous existence” (Alexandra David-Neel, Magic and Mystery in Tibet)
She outlines ceremonies where corpses dance and talks of lama with powers such as telepathy. These further impact the mystic ideal of Tibet in French minds.

- “When I was only a few steps from the tent, a flimsy veil of mist seemed to open before it… And suddenly I did not see the lama any more. He had vanished” (David-Neel, Magic and Mystery in Tibet)

This is an example of a lama voluntarily exercising power. It can be unconscious and involuntary as well.
Conclusions

- David-Neel’s portrayal of Tibet furthered its mysticism in France. This inspired an interest in Tibet and Buddhism in general that spurred the popularity of Buddhism in France today.
Works Consulted


