Outside university walls: Alexandra David-Neel's influence in developing the field of Buddhist studies

Abstract
Alexandra David-Neel (1868-1969) was a Frenchwoman who is known primarily as an adventurer, explorer, and travel writer because she walked across the Himalayan Mountains into the city of Lhasa in 1924 when foreigners were prohibited from entering Tibet. She returned to Europe to write about her experiences in two famous books: My Journey to Lhasa (1933) and Magic and Mystery in Tibet (1971).

David-Neel wrote twenty more books about mystical, philosophical, sociological, political, and historical themes (published on five continents) that reflect discourses that changed over time within different cultures. The discourses about Orientalism and colonialism along with feminist and gender studies intersect in the discussion about the historical context in which David-Neel lived, the cultural milieus of Western Europe and Asia where she wrote her books, and the reception of her books by the public. One must read a combination of travel books and autobiographical narratives in order to understand David-Neel as a person, the influence of her writings on the general population, and the difficulty in categorizing those writings.

The thesis of this dissertation is that David-Neel should be recognized as an educator who occupied a position as an independent writer outside university walls at the beginning of the field of Buddhist studies. She was a bridge between academic and popular education through her lectures, articles, and books about comparative religion in Asian cultures. She stimulated the interest and curiosity of the Western public in spiritual ways of knowing, in Buddhism as a viable way of life, in Tibet as a country, and in Tibetans as a unique ethnic group. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama credited David-Neel with "preserving" the Tibetan culture as it existed before the Chinese invasion through photographs and descriptions of the Tibetan people based upon her own experiences.

The five chapters in this dissertation discuss David-Neel's life (early influences, educational background, obstacles and turning points that prompted her decisions), her works as a travel writer, her analysis of European and Asian cultures, her influence on the field of Buddhist and Tibetan studies, her innovative educational practices, and directions for future research.
Alexandra David-Néel's 'My Journey to Lhasa' is an epic journey of self-discovery into Tibet's forbidden city. ALEXANDRA DAVID-NÉEL'S travelogue, which includes an introduction by Tenzin Gyatzo, the 14th Dalai Lama, belongs to an era when it was possible to slip into a protracted obscurity and follow one's dreams to the very end of the earth, no matter how absurd or phantasmagorical. Such was its impact, My Journey to Lhasa influenced many of the Beat writers, including Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, as well as the Eastern philosopher, Alan Watts. In order to prevent any outside influence, all foreigners were prohibited from travelling throughout the country.