

# Book Review

## *MAGIC AND MYSTERY IN TIBET*

By Alexandra David-Neel (Souvenir Press. 30s.)

Review By Michael Anis

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This is a new edition of Mme. David-Neel's *With Mystics and Magicians in Tibet* which first came out more than thirty years ago. It was the outcome of ten years private investigation into and experience of those strange concomitants of advanced states of spiritual realization which so many early travellers in Tibet reported on, but only at second-hand. The value of this book, therefore, lies in the fact that Mme. David-Neel describes only that which she personally witnessed, experienced or heard of first-hand, and her own scepticism lends considerable authority to her accounts of telepathy, levitation and many different kinds of psychic phenomena. What is certainly even more important is that she related all these to the Buddhist framework of which they form a part. In this way the psychic phenomena are seen as by-products of the spiritual path—not the path itself. For this reason in Tibet they were not subjected to that morbid curiosity which is so easily aroused in Europe when such matters are discussed. The cultivation of apparently miraculous powers was never undertaken for their own sake, but rather as a means to obtaining a high spiritual goal. It is only outside the Buddhist tradition, in the last remnants of *Bon po* shamanism, that "magic" was practised as an end in itself.

It is good that this book should have been reprinted in Mme. David-Neel's hundredth year but it is deplorable that it should have been accompanied by an introduction which is both pretentious and inaccurate by a man who, on his own showing, has completely missed the point of this extraordinary work. The author of this introduction takes the practices and achievements of the Tibetan mystics as described by Mine. David-Neel as an opportunity to sensationalize what he calls "this elusive dream-world" of Tibet. The title is changed, according to his wish, to *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* and, according to the slipshod way in which this edition has been brought out, the old title is nevertheless printed on every alternate page of the book. One feels that the publishers ought to have done better in Mme. David-Neel's hundredth year, for she is really the grand old lady of European travellers and she has perhaps penetrated further than anyone else into the esoteric practices of Tibetan Buddhism. For all that, her books on Tibet retain a certain superiority and a capacity for intolerance which has persisted through all her writings. She never developed a sense of *tradition*, in the wider sense of that term, nor did she really define to herself carefully enough her "place" in Tibet, as an outsider trying to become an insider. However, what can one do today but express one's sincerest admiration for her wonderful achievement in bringing to light so much that is valuable and hope that she will live at least up to the sacred Tibetan number of one hundred and eight?