

On the Threshold of the “Land of Marvels:” Alexandra David-Neel in Sikkim and the Making of Global Buddhism

Samuel Thévoz, Fellow, The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation

I look around and I see these giant mountains and my hermit hut. All of this is too fantastic to be true. I look into the past and watch things that happened to me and to others; [...] I am giving lectures at the Sorbonne, I am an artist, a reporter, a writer; images of backstages, newsrooms, boats, railways unfold like in a movie. [...] All of this is a show produced by shallow ghosts, all of this is brought into play by the imagination. There is no “self” or “others,” there is only an eternal dream that goes on, giving birth to transient characters, fictional adventures.¹

An icon: Alexandra David-Neel in the global public sphere

Alexandra David-Neel (Paris, 1868–Digne-les-bains, 1969)² certainly ranks among the most celebrated of the Western Buddhist pioneers who popularized the modern perception of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism at large.³ As is well known, it is her illegal trip from Eastern Tibet to Lhasa in 1924 that made her famous. Her global success as an intrepid explorer started with her first published travel narrative, *My Journey to Lhasa*, which was published in 1927

1 Alexandra David-Néel, *Correspondance avec son mari, 1904–1941* (Paris: Plon, 2000), 392. Translations of all quoted letters are mine.

2 This work was supported by the Swiss National Foundation for Scientific Research under grant PA00P1_145398: <http://p3.snf.ch/project-145398>.

3 In a note dated March 18, 1935, David-Neel stated to the German editor Brockhaus that she wanted her definitive pen name to be written Alexandra David-Neel, although the correct spelling was Néel as in the usual French spelling followed by most French editors and biographers, and she herself pronounced it /nel/ and not /ni:l/ as English speakers would and do. Her choice not only denotes her ambivalence toward her husband, but also tends to emphasize her early desire to become a distinct transnational figure through her published works, as can be seen from the publication of *My Journey to Lhasa* in English. I shall henceforth respect the international spelling.

in New York.⁴ In this widely acclaimed book, she explains how she overcame the difficulties of journeying to a forbidden country and entering its capital city right under the noses of Tibetan and British authorities. From this point on, this French traveler was an international hero, and stood out both as an iconic woman adventurer and as a popular authority on Tibet and Buddhism.⁵

As such, generations of readers interested in Asia have acknowledged her as a key Western figure for spiritual seekers of Eastern religion and philosophy. Among them were Alan Watts (1915–1973), who wrote the foreword to the American translation of *The Secret Oral Teachings in Tibetan Buddhist Sects*,⁶ and representatives of the Beat Generation such as Jack Kerouac (1922–1969), Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997) and Gary Snyder (1930–). In his foreword to *The Secret Oral Teachings*, Watts insisted that it was “the most direct, no-nonsense, and down-to-earth explanation of Mahayana Buddhism which has thus far been written.” Having read David-Neel’s book, Snyder urged Ginsberg to read it cover-to-cover, claiming that it was “a great book, with absolute answers on some questions.”⁷ Ginsberg later admitted himself that the “Blakean imagery in Alexandra David-Neel’s *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* [her second bestselling book, translated in 1931] magnetized [him] toward Buddhist meditation.”⁸

David-Neel, the adventurer of the Tibetan highlands, eventually became famous as the explorer of the Tibetan spiritual world. Sara Mills accurately describes her authoritative status as a Western female writer:

It is not unusual to find a woman writing about spirituality, and some of the authority of David-Neel’s texts derives from her position within this tradition [of female mysticism].⁹

4 David-Neel, *My Journey to Lhasa* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1927). It was first published in French under the title *Souvenirs d’une Parisienne au Thibet* (Pékin: unknown publisher, 1925), and later reedited as *Voyage d’une Parisienne à Lhasa* (Paris: Plon, 1927).

5 See for example the typical titles of the numerous biographies dedicated to David-Neel, such as Ruth Middleton, *Alexandra David-Neel: Portrait of an Adventurer* (Boston: Shambhala, 1989) or Joëlle Désiré-Marchand, *Alexandra David-Néel: Vie et voyages; Itinéraires géographiques et spirituels* (Paris: Arthaud, 2009) and its alternative title *De Paris à Lhasa, de l’aventure à la sagesse* (Paris: Arthaud, 1997).

6 Alexandra David-Néel and Aphur Yongden, *Les enseignements secrets dans les sectes bouddhistes tibétaines* (Paris: Adyar, 1951). Translated by H. N. M. Hardy as *The Secret Oral Teachings in Tibetan Buddhist Sects* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1967).

7 Allen Ginsburg and Gary Snyder, *The Selected Letters of Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder, 1956–1991*, ed. Bill Morgan (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2008), 54.

8 Quoted in Barbara Foster and Michael Foster, *The Secret Lives of Alexandra David-Neel: A Biography of the Explorer of Tibet and Its Forbidden Practices* (New York: Overlook, 1998), back cover.

9 Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women’s Travel Writing and Colonialism*

Mills more precisely defines David-Neel's religious and literary heterodoxy in the scope of early-twentieth-century Western culture:

However, it is unusual to find a [Western] woman writing authoritatively about a religion other than Christianity, and claiming mystical and supernatural powers for herself. This is obviously not easily recuperated within the West's "regime of truth."¹⁰

Although David-Neel was not the only Western female Buddhist convert during the first "Buddhist vogue" in the Victorian era,¹¹ she definitely became a literary writer of her own kind. For this very reason, as Mills demonstrates, David-Neel's published books triggered some controversial responses.¹² Her specific socio-literary position relies precisely on the very debunking of the "West's 'regime of truth'" that she offered in the ambivalent status of reality and fiction she scrupulously maintained in her narratives. This, as I intend to show, is actually the core of what David-Neel wanted Western readers to learn from Tibetan Buddhism, and it calls not only for a revised biographical study but for a detailed literary analysis.

David-Neel and Buddhist modernism

Certainly, David-Neel was not the only Westerner at the time to head for Asia on a spiritual quest. From 1878 onward, Russian-born Helena P. Blavatsky (1831–1891) and American Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907),

(London: Routledge, 1993), 208.

10 Mills, *Discourses of Difference*, 208. In her letters, David-Neel nonetheless mentions early on that she is acquainted with major Western and Asian figures of Hinduist and Buddhist modernism and academia, such as Mira Alfassa (called "La Mère;" David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 94), Mabel Bode (Ibid., 138), Caroline Rhys Davids (Ibid., 76), Mrs. Narasu (Lakshmi pokala Narasu's wife; ibid., 92), Sarada Devi (Shri Ramakrishna's wife; ibid., 117), and Ellen Woodroffe (Ibid., 119). She also evokes Sister Nivedita (Margaret Noble; ibid., 118) and had ties with Josephine and Betty McLeod, Lady Caithness and Annie Besant (see Jacques Brosse, *Alexandra David-Neel* [1978; repr., Paris: Albin Michel, 2013, Kindle edition], 31, 35, and 74).

11 Thomas Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism, 1844–1912: Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992), 48–77. Though she (incorrectly) surmised that she might "have been the only Buddhist in Paris" in the 1890s (David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 147), David-Neel never formally converted to Buddhism, unlike, for example, the American Maria deSouza Canavarro (aka Sister Sanghamata) in 1897. See Thomas Tweed, "Inclusivism and the Spiritual Journey of Marie de Souza Canavarro (1849–1933)," *Religion* 24, no. 1 (1994): 43–58. On the role of women in modern Buddhism in Asia, see for example Tessa Bartholomeusz, *Women under the Bo Tree: Buddhist Nuns in Sri Lanka* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

12 Most famously, Jeanne Denys, *Alexandra David-Néel au Tibet: Une supercherie dévoilée* (Paris: La Pensée Universelle, 1972).

co-founders of the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875, had focused on Hinduism and Buddhism. Both took the vows of lay Buddhists in Ceylon in 1880.¹³ Blavatsky even claimed to have studied in Tibet with “Mahatmas” (Great Teachers) from whom she then received telepathic messages. These spiritual masters, dwelling in secret places in Tibet, kept an ancient wisdom from which all religions had derived.¹⁴ By 1883, the Society had already developed into a wide international network and established its headquarters in Adyar (close to Madras, now Chennai). Hence, beside its spiritual agenda, the Society was a vital structure for spiritual seekers such as David-Neel, who stayed with Theosophists in India and was able to benefit from their local connections. David-Neel was indeed first introduced to modern Buddhism through the Theosophical Society, notably during an 1889 stay in London that she deliberately initiated with the intention of traveling to India. Since the 1890s, Buddhism had drawn the attention of Westerners as a serious alternative to Christianity, both as an arguably “modern” and “rational” religion,¹⁵ and as a potential “world religion.”¹⁶ In the West, it was most notably introduced as such to the first World Parliament of Religion (Chicago, 1893) by prominent Asian Buddhist representatives such as Anagarika Dharmapala (born David Hewavitarane, 1864–1963) from Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Sôen Shaku (1859–1919) from Japan.

At first supported by Henry S. Olcott, Anagarika Dharmapala adhered to the Theosophical Society’s agenda to revive Buddhism in India and became one of the most prominent Buddhist reformers worldwide.¹⁷ In 1891, Dharmapala and Edwin Arnold (the author of the famous 1879 epic poem *The Light of Asia*) co-founded the Maha Bodhi Society for the restoration and preservation

13 Pioneering and influential Theosophical publications on Buddhism are Henry S. Olcott, *The Buddhist Catechism* (Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1881)—which was immediately translated into Sinhalese by Anagarika Dharmapala—and Alfred P. Sinnett, *Esoteric Buddhism* (London: Trübner, 1883).

14 Among Blavatsky’s publications, see especially her introduction to *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. 1 (Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1888).

15 Expanding the field of the encounter of Buddhism with the Western world—among others, Stephen Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and the West* (London: Aquarian, 1994)—recent studies have highlighted the rise of “modern Buddhism” at the end of the nineteenth century. See especially Donald S. Lopez, introduction to *A Modern Buddhist Bible: Essential Readings from East and West* (Boston: Beacon, 2002), i–xlii; David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

16 Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions or: How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), 121–146.

17 For a recent biography and insightful study of Dharmapala’s multiple agendas and personas in Ceylon, India, and worldwide, see Steven Kemper, *Rescued from the Nation: Anagarika Dharmapala and the Buddhist World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

of the ancient Buddhist sites of India, and in 1892 Dharmapala launched a monthly journal, *The Maha Bodhi and the United Buddhist World*. Invited by Paul Carus (1852–1919), Rinzai Zen master Sōen Shaku, a famous Buddhist reformer of the Meiji era, represented Mahāyāna Buddhism before the World Parliament.¹⁸ Shaku wrote a preface to Carus' acclaimed *Gospel of Buddha*, published the following year; his student Daisetsu Teitarō Suzuki (1870–1966) translated it into Japanese under the title *Budda no fukuin*.¹⁹

Very recently, modern Buddhist studies have highlighted how modern Buddhism first emerged in Asia and how Asian Buddhist modernism was a response to the “colonial frameworks that were coming to shape their world.”²⁰ Meanwhile, other connected works have shed light on “pioneer” Western Buddhists in Asia—mostly American,²¹ British,²² and Irish²³ travellers to Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, and Japan.²⁴ These studies have provided us with a far more complex account of the making of global Buddhism than the previous intellectual history of “Western Buddhism”²⁵ and bring to the fore the wide array of prospects that Buddhism offered at the time to a socially and culturally

18 Martin J. Verhoeven, “Americanizing the Buddha: Paul Carus and the Transformation of Asian Thought,” in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, ed. Charles Prebish and Kenneth Tanaka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 207–227.

19 Judith Snodgrass, *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and the Columbian Exhibition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 249.

20 Alicia Turner, *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2014), 2. See also Kemper, *Rescued from the Nation*; Anne Blackburn, *Locations of Buddhism: Colonialism and Modernity in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Erik Braun, *The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and the Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

21 Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism*.

22 Elizabeth Harris, *Theravada Buddhism and the British Encounter: Religious, Missionary, and Colonial Experiences in Nineteenth Century Sri Lanka* (London: Routledge, 2006).

23 Laurence Cox, *Buddhism and Ireland: From the Celts to the Counter-Culture and Beyond* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013).

24 Brian Bocking et al., eds., *A Buddhist Crossroads: Pioneer Western Buddhists and Asian Networks, 1860–1960* (London: Routledge, 2015).

25 See Brian Bocking, Laurence Cox, and Shin‘ichi Yoshinaga, “The First Buddhist Mission to the West: Charles Pfoundes and the London Buddhist mission of 1889–1892,” *Diskus* 16, no. 3 (2014): 1–33. It had long been accepted that the crucial departure point of Western Buddhism was the ordination of Allan Bennett (aka Ananda Metteyya, 1872–1923) as a Buddhist monk in 1902 in Burma. Metteyya then founded the International Buddhist Society (Buddhasasana Samagama) in 1903 in Rangoon. See Heinz Bechert, “Buddhist Revival in East and West,” in *The World of Buddhism*, ed. Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 273–285 and Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West*, 40–41, 307.

diverse audience:²⁶ to “overcome colonialism,” “bring world peace,” “temper the arrogance of the West,” create an “alternative culture and belonging,” and redefine “identity.”²⁷ Indeed, these studies emphasize the fact that modern Buddhism was made of a “cacophony of voices” that also included “dissident Orientalists,”²⁸ and show empirical evidence for David McMahan’s statement that “the modernization of Buddhism [...] has in no way been an exclusively western project or simply a representation of the eastern Other [...]. This new form of Buddhism [as opposed to traditional forms] [...] has been, therefore, a cocreation of Asians, Europeans, and Americans.”²⁹

As an early Western Buddhist convert, Alexandra David-Neel quickly looks for contact with modern Buddhist representatives, both Asian and Western. She must undoubtedly have felt isolated in her own social circles and thus makes an attempt to establish greater “transcontinental sodalities”³⁰ in the Buddhist world. For example, from 1908 onward, David-Neel corresponds with D. T. Suzuki, whose famous *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism*, published in 1907, probably first triggered her future interest in Mahāyāna Buddhism. She later visits him in Japan, and often discusses his approach to (modern) Buddhism in her publications. She also most notably corresponds with Dharmapala, starting from 1910. She represents him at the *Congrès de la Libre Pensée* held in Brussels. As the spokesperson of modern Buddhists, she reads Dharmapala’s statement that “the Buddha was the first to proclaim the science of human emancipation from ritualism and superstition, created by a despotic clergy” and that, much to his satisfaction, “Western promoters of scientific thought worked according to the same principle for the emancipation of and education of the entire human race, without distinction of nationality or race.”³¹

26 Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism*, 48–77. Tweed extends the study of early Western Buddhism beyond its rationalist appropriations and includes “esoterics” and “romantics” in his typology of Euro-American Buddhist sympathizers and adherents. Similarly, Franklin pays attention to the “elements of Buddhism [which] enter[ed] scholarly, literary, and popular discourses” in Victorian Europe. J. Jeffrey Franklin, *The Lotus and the Lion: Buddhism and the British Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 86.

27 Bocking et al., introduction to *A Buddhist Crossroads*, 4.

28 Bocking et al., introduction to *A Buddhist Crossroads*, 1 and 7. See also Laurence Cox, “Rethinking Early Western Buddhists: Beachcombers, ‘Going Native,’ and Dissident Orientalism,” in Bocking et al., *A Buddhist Crossroads*, 116–133.

29 McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 6.

30 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 36. As mentioned in note 3 above, her choice of a pen name reflects a similar strategy. As a writer and a thinker, she also took part in international movements such as feminism and anarchism, and as an opera singer, she toured in Europe and Asia.

31 Quoted in Brosse, *Alexandra David-Neel*, 48 (my translation).

The same year, she writes to and is visited at her house in Tunis by Nyanatiloka Mahāthera (German-born Anton Gueth, 1878–1959), who had left Frankfurt in 1902 to study Buddhism in India, was ordained as a Buddhist monk (*bhikkhu*), and founded a “forest monastery,” the “Island Hermitage” of Polgasduwa, on an islet of Rathgama Lake, close to Dodanduwa, where David-Neel spends time on her arrival in Ceylon in September 1911.³²

At the same time, David-Neel emphasizes the compatibility of Buddhism with modern paradigms of detraditionalization, demythologization, and psychologization.³³ She thus explicitly shares the agenda of “modern Buddhism,” which Lopez has defined as “an international Buddhism that transcends cultural and national boundaries, creating [...] a cosmopolitan network of intellectuals, writing most often in English.”³⁴ Modern Buddhists generally claim that “ancient Buddhism” fundamentally shared modern ideals of “reason, empiricism, science, universalism, individualism, tolerance, freedom and the rejection of religious orthodoxy,” and place meditation at the core of Buddhism.³⁵ Whereas this definition embraces only one aspect, one “sect,” of the modernization of Buddhism, it fits David-Neel’s first agenda, which she makes clear in her first publications on Buddhism.³⁶

While elaborating on this point by way of making David-Neel’s background more tangible, in this article I would like to show how her sojourns in Sikkim actually caused her own Buddhist worldview and *imaginaire* to change direction, and concretely fashioned her literary career in the long run. In this regard, as I will show, her complex trajectory sheds light both on the history of Western Buddhism and on the encounter between Western and Asian Buddhists in the modern era. On the one hand, David-Neel’s sojourns in Sikkim definitely lead her to blur the supposed categories of “Victorian Buddhism,” defined by Thomas Tweed as “rationalist” (as in Lopez’ definition quoted above), “esoteric” (as in the Theosophical trend to which David-Neel was indebted), and “romantic” (a third category to which David-Neel belongs

32 Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West*, 40–41 and 307–308.

33 See McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 27–60.

34 Lopez, *A Modern Buddhist Bible*, xxxix.

35 *Ibid.*, x.

36 Alexandra David, “Quelques écrivains bouddhistes contemporains,” *Mercure de France* 82, no. 300 (16 December 1909): 637–647 and David, *Le modernisme bouddhiste et le bouddhisme du Bouddha* (Paris: Alcan, 1911). She was the first to use the term “Buddhist modernism” in a published work. See Martin Baumann, “Culture Contact and Valuation: Early German Buddhists and the Creation of a ‘Buddhism in Protestant Shape,’” *Numen* 44, no. 3 (1997): 270–295.

as an artist and literary writer).³⁷ On the other hand, as an aspiring Eastern scholar, as a Buddhist convert and reformer, and as a Western woman traveling in Asia, David-Neel engages in most “elements that we now take to constitute modern Buddhism, or the multiple modern Buddhisms: the rise of the laity as practitioners and organizers (including meditation movements), new roles for women, for scholars and indeed for monks, the development of national sanghas and ethno-nationalist Buddhist discourses, and the association of Buddhism with a de-mythologized rationalist and scientific discourse.”³⁸ In the course of her experience in Sikkim, David-Neel redefines her own position among modern Buddhist proponents and re-imagines the purpose of Buddhism in the modern world.

Although I focus here on a Western figure of global Buddhism, I intend to highlight not only David-Neel’s own agency in the globalization of Buddhism *per se*, but the multifarious patterns that can be ascribed to Sikkim and Sikkimese agents, although these are sometimes not clearly decipherable in her own writings.³⁹ However twisted or concealed these voices may seem in David-Neel’s final narratives, the story told here is one of “cocreation” and interconnections shedding light on a “global phenomenon with a wide diversity of participants,” a “dynamic, complex, and plural set of historical processes with loose bonds and fuzzy boundaries.”⁴⁰ The label “global Buddhism” opens up inquiries into the ways modernization “disembeds Buddhist discourses from its traditional sites and reembeds them in a wide variety of discourses,”⁴¹ with mounting tensions between global standardization and local idiosyncrasies and traditions. As a literary Buddhist writer, David-Neel was not only committing to a non-Western religion, she was also looking for a distinct discursive form that could prove suitable for the modern world.

Despite her status as a prominent, if controversial, Western Buddhist figure, David-Neel seems to have been excised from the scholarly narratives of global Buddhism.⁴² In the light of the recent interest in the globalization

37 Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism*, 48–77. Tweed points out that these types are non-exclusive and can coexist in one individual.

38 Bocking et al., introduction to *A Buddhist Crossroads*, 1.

39 At this stage, further empirical studies are needed to highlight Sikkimese perspectives on the French traveler. In this paper, I focus on David-Neel’s writings and use available local sources for biographical details.

40 McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 6.

41 *Ibid.*, 256.

42 For instance, David-Neel is never mentioned in *Contemporary Buddhism* or the *Journal of Global Buddhism*, the most prominent journals in the field of modern Buddhism. On this question, see

of Buddhism, David-Neel nonetheless deserves to be reconsidered, insofar as the successive stages of her encounter with Asia contribute to an understanding of the complexity of the modern history of Buddhism. Her encounter is a telling example of global and local forces at play in the rise of global Buddhism and provides material on rarely referenced aspects such as the role played by Western women, French Buddhist figures, and Sikkimese representatives in the diffusion of Buddhism throughout the twentieth century and in the reassessment of Tibetan Buddhism in the scope of modern Buddhism.

In fact, David-Neel's encounter with Sikkim and its reflections in her writings crucially provide insight into the renewal of the perception of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhism was labeled "Lamaism" and was held to be a despicable collection of backward superstitions and barbaric practices maintained by despotic lamas exerting their power over ignorant people. L. A. Waddell (1864–1938) famously stated in 1895, for example, that "Lamaism is only thinly and imperfectly varnished over with Buddhist symbolism, beneath which the sinister growth of poly-demonist superstition darkly appears."⁴³ It is generally assumed that the Tibetan diaspora in the 1950s was responsible for propelling Tibetan Buddhism to the forefront of global Buddhist trends, as Snyder and Ginsberg's quotes above testify, both in popular representations and in the academic field of Tibetology.⁴⁴ As I argue here, the role of David-Neel's personal engagement and literary agenda in the advent of this renewed perception still need to be carefully retraced.

Prior to her visits to Tibet in 1924, Alexandra David-Neel had already been acquainted with the Himalayas for a long time. In fact, her encounter with Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism took place not in Tibet, but in Sikkim. Ruled by the "Dharma kings" (*Chos rgyal*) of the Namgyal dynasty, Sikkim, a Himalayan state on the Tibetan border, was politically independent from Tibet, although it had adopted Tibetan Buddhism as a state religion in the

Marion Dapsance, review of *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, by David L. McMahan, *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 168 (2015): 247. Lopez offers some explanation as to why David-Neel belonged to the "Great Mystifiers" of Western Buddhist history, alongside Helena P. Blavatsky and Cyril H. Hoskin, aka Tuesday Lobsang Rampa; see Donald S. Lopez, "The Image of Tibet of the Great Mystifiers," in *Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections, and Fantasies*, ed. Thierry Dodin and Heinz R  ther (London: Wisdom, 2001), 183–200. This notwithstanding, he does not study David-Neel for herself in his own work, although she does feature in Lopez, *A Modern Buddhist Bible*, 59–67.

43 Laurence A. Waddell, preface to *The Buddhism of Tibet, or Lamaism: With Its Mystic Cults, Symbolism, and Mythology, and in Its Relation to Indian Buddhism* (London: Allen, 1895), ix; see also Donald S. Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: Chicago University, 1998), 15–45.

44 Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La* and Jeffrey Paine, *Re-Enchantment: Tibetan Buddhism Comes to the West* (New York: Norton, 2004).

seventeenth century. At the time of David-Neel's travels, Sikkim was a British protectorate and thus a relatively convenient place to experience Himalayan landscapes and observe aspects of Tibetan Buddhism, without leaving the limits of the British Rāj. This invites us to reconsider the construction of Alexandra David-Neel's own heroic image of an explorer of what she herself called the "land of marvels." The lofty images of a spiritual Tibet, a "mind's Tibet,"⁴⁵ which she has helped create in the West, are firmly rooted in time and space, and need to be connected to concrete encounters with local Buddhist representatives and with Sikkim's inspiring scenery.

Alexandra David-Neel as a writer and a committed Buddhist

David-Neel's trajectory before specializing in Asian and Buddhist topics from 1909 onward is both strikingly singular and deeply telling of the cultural background from which Western Buddhism emerged in the nineteenth century's *fin de siècle* intellectual circles: She had been a journal writer on feminist and anarchist topics⁴⁶ from 1893 onward under the pen names Alexandra David and Mitra—a mythological name from the Vedas—and an opera singer under the stage name Alexandra Myrial, presumably after Victor Hugo's fictional character Mr. Myriel in *Les Misérables* (1862). Her initial approach to Buddhism had three aspects: it was theosophical, scholarly, and experiential. Although David-Neel seems to have converted to Buddhism without any direct connection with other Buddhists,⁴⁷ a crucial stage of her interest in Buddhism can be identified as her encounter in London in 1889 with members of the Theosophical Society, who shared their ideas on Buddhism with her. She was a frequent visitor to the headquarters of the Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland, founded in 1907 by Thomas W. Rhys Davids (1843–1922), one of the most prominent scholars of Buddhist studies at the time, in anticipation of Ananda Metteyya's return from Burma.⁴⁸ This first encounter with Western Buddhist circles prompted her to attend Sylvain Lévi's (1863–1969)⁴⁹ and Philippe-Édouard Foucaux's (1811–1894) lectures on Indian and Tibetan

45 Patrick French, *Tibet, Tibet: A Personal History of a Lost Land* (London: HarperCollins, 2003).

46 See Alexandra Myrial, *Pour la vie*, with a foreword by Élisée Reclus (Bruxelles: Les Temps nouveaux, 1901).

47 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 146.

48 Not to be confused with the later Buddhist Society founded in 1924 by Christmas Humphreys (1901–1983). In her letters, David-Neel makes fun of the numerous "bums that revolve around the few scholars that founded the Buddhist Society of England." David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 77.

49 She often refers to him in her letters. David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 84, 100, 138 and *passim*. See Désiré-Marchand, *Alexandra David-Néel*, 467.

Buddhism at the Collège de France when she went back to Paris at the end of the same year. Appointed a professor in Sanskrit literature and language at the Collège de France in 1894, Sylvain Lévi was the most authoritative French Indologist of the time. He welcomed Alexandra David-Neel on her return to France in 1925 and introduced her to the Parisian intellectual milieu. The library of the Guimet Museum, which had just opened, was where she claimed to have had her “calling.”⁵⁰ In 1891, she left Europe for her first stay in India (she would return there in 1896 and 1901), where she met famous Theosophists, Buddhist reformers, and *Vedānta* teachers.

At a second stage, through her readings and her own commitment, David-Neel developed an understanding of Buddhism that tended to depart both from the spiritual syncretism of her Theosophical fellows and from the philological rigor of the academic world. At first, she shared the atheistic and nihilistic conception of Buddhism as the “cult of nothingness”⁵¹ that was widespread in *fin de siècle* Europe. This pessimistic conception, popular in disenchanted philosophical and artistic milieus, was inspired both by Schopenhauer’s philosophy⁵² and by philological debates on the notion of *nirvāṇa* rooted in Eugène Burnouf’s (1801–1852) pioneering *Introduction à l’histoire du Bouddhisme indien* (1844).⁵³

However, two decades later, as a “practicing and militant Buddhist,”⁵⁴ she came to defend what she herself called “Buddhist modernism.” While supporting the “revival of Buddhism around and inside India,”⁵⁵ she intended to remove Western forms of “Buddhisms” that in her opinion amounted to “esoteric, spiritualistic, theosophical or occultist nonsensical mixtures of ideas borrowed here and there.”⁵⁶ Her intention in returning to India in 1911 is best described in her own words in *Le modernisme bouddhiste et le bouddhisme du Bouddha*, her first substantial contribution to the popularization of Buddhism:

50 David-Néel, *L’Inde où j’ai vécu* (Paris: Plon, 1969), 12.

51 See Roger-Pol Droit, *The Cult of Nothingness: The Philosophers and the Buddha* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2003).

52 For a discussion of this widespread view of Schopenhauer’s Buddhism, see Urs App, *Schopenhauers Kompass* (Rorschach: University Media, 2011).

53 See Alexandra David-Néel, *La Lampe de Sagesse* [published posthumously] (Monaco: Le Rocher, 1986), 24.

54 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 132.

55 *Ibid.*, 206.

56 David, *Le modernisme bouddhiste*, 10; see also her article “Is There a Secret Doctrine?” *The Buddhist Review* 9, no. 3 (September–December 1917): 105–112.

One will find here not the Buddhism taught by this or that sect, but the Buddhism of the Buddha himself, as close as the scholars' research works can bring us to it. It is the very Buddhism reformers or "modernists," if I may use a vivid word that has become common nowadays, are struggling to establish in the East and to spread in the West, which is quite an unprecedented phenomenon.⁵⁷

David-Neel adds that the practice of Buddhism in most of Asia amounted to degenerate forms of Buddhism, an idea that, as we have seen, was widely shared at the time. While David-Neel takes on most of the disparaging assumptions on living forms of Buddhism, it is important to note that her book ends with considerations on the modernity of Buddhism as regards the role of women in society and, more generally, social inequality. She thus considers European and Asian "Buddhist modernists" as vanguard thinkers who see Buddhism as a rational method of liberation and develop realistic plans of social reforms out of it. In this respect, she evokes in particular Anagarika Dharmapala and the Maha Bodhi Society in Calcutta, but also Thomas W. Rhys Davids, Ananda Metteyya, the Burmese Maung Nee, and the Indian Lakshmi Narasu: they all propose, she writes, "a rigorously logical method, a continual appeal to our reason."⁵⁸

These aspects of David-Neel's biography help delineate her approach to Buddhism at the time when she entered Sikkim: not only was she a convert, she was also an active promoter of Buddhist modernism, both in the West and in the East. Her encounter with Buddhist practitioners in Sikkim would put her conception of Buddhism to the test. It would trigger a shift in her appreciation of Tibetan practices and beliefs, and would also nuance her perception of Tibet as a whole.

Sikkim beneath the heroic adventurer's bestsellers: The traveler's letters to her husband

Alexandra David-Neel sojourned in Sikkim twice, first from April to October 1912 and then again from December 1913 to June 1916. She gives some insights into these two stays very briefly in the opening pages of *My Journey to Lhasa* and offers more details in the two first chapters of *With Mystics and Magicians in Tibet*.⁵⁹ In order to highlight the background of the well-known story of her

57 Ibid., 11 (my translation).

58 David, "Quelques écrivains bouddhistes contemporains," 63 (my translation).

59 Alexandra David-Néel, *Mystiques et Magiciens du Tibet* (Paris: Plon, 1929). Translated as

encounter with Tibet, I rely on her letters to Philippe Néel (1861–1941), whom she had married in 1904.⁶⁰ Mr. Néel resided in Tunis, where he worked as a railway engineer.⁶¹ He had been rather reluctant to support his wife’s departure to Asia for what he called her “growing mysticism.”⁶² This may explain why David-Neel states that she “only focuses on what is likely to be of concern to [him], leaving aside the philosophical or mystical aspects which prevail here.”⁶³

One can thus discern in these letters a strategy of persuasion at a time when she was still in need of her husband’s financial support and of social recognition. In this respect, it is striking for the modern reader accustomed to David-Neel’s style that the very topics for which she became famous are notably absent or given reduced importance in her letters. These documents, on the other hand, allow us to follow David-Neel’s trips and encounters almost day by day. In this way they give us an insight into the more practical aspects of her travels and introduce us to the local agents she met, so we can hear voices that would become muffled or anonymous in her print oeuvre, and see their overall effect on her own agenda. Moreover, these letters shed light on the evolution of her perception of the Tibetan world.

At the edge of the British Rāj: The two sojourns in Sikkim

When she arrived in Ceylon on 18 November 1911, David-Neel was no longer an opera singer touring French colonies in North Africa and South Asia. She was now an aspiring Eastern scholar traveling across territories of the British Empire on an official mission for the French Ministry of Public Education.⁶⁴

With Mystics and Magicians in Tibet (London: John Lane, 1931). Published in the USA as *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* (New York: Kendall, 1932).

60 Alexandra David-Néel, *Journal de voyage: Lettres à son mari*, 2 vols. (Paris: Plon, 1975). I shall refer here to the later reprint of her letters, *Correspondance avec son mari*.

61 For an analysis of the Néels’ marriage from a sociological standpoint, see Heidi Kasevich, “A Civilized Yogi: The Life of French Explorer Alexandra David Néel, 1868–1969,” (PhD diss., New York University, 2011).

62 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 181.

63 *Ibid.*, 84.

64 In her initial agenda, David-Neel planned a “Buddhist world tour” (Brosse, *Alexandra David-Neel*, 60), comprising visits to Burma and Japan, but not Tibet and the Himalayas (David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 132). While this agenda highlights the Western imagination of the time on Buddhist cultural geography and Tibet’s ambiguous position, it also suggests that David-Neel’s interest in Tibetan Buddhism was born while traveling in India as she became more familiar with the geopolitical issues of the British Rāj with regard to Tibet. Simultaneously, her encounter in Calcutta with Sir John Woodroffe (aka Arthur Avalon), an expert on Indian Tantrism, Yoga, and Shaktism, contributed to

Her one-year journey from Southern to Northern India made her aware of the specific geopolitical issues linked with recent changes in the British policy regarding Tibet, and David-Neel writes to her husband time and again that “here the events in Tibet are the main topic all the time.”⁶⁵ Indeed, after Francis Younghusband (1863–1942) led the infamous Frontier Commission to Lhasa in 1904,⁶⁶ regulations negotiated between Tibet and the British Rāj of India generated what Charles Sherring called a “British borderland.”⁶⁷ They gave rise to new central posts for the British officials—the so-called “Frontier cadre” of recent historians⁶⁸—on the Eastern border between India and Tibet. Thus, Gangtok in Sikkim had been the administrative capital since 1894 and the residence of British Political Officers since 1868. Sikkim itself had been a British protectorate since 1890. Yatung, on the Nathula Pass, and Gyantse, further on the trade route into Central Tibet, became trade agencies in the wake of the Younghusband expedition, while the Sikkim-Tibetan frontier was settled and Tibet’s claim over Sikkim as a territorial dependency was put to an end. Tibet consequently became a strongly restricted area with southern borders supervised both by Tibetan and British authorities. This geopolitical situation explains the turn David-Neel’s sojourn in Sikkim was to take. In order to live near the border, she had to lean on the British colonial economic and administrative structure and local Western networks. However, the imperial framework that had enabled her to reach India and the remote slopes of Sikkim soon proved to come with restrictions which she would gradually try to loosen or escape—eventually at her own expense.

A brief analysis of the places to which David-Neel traveled during her two successive sojourns in Sikkim indicates how each of them differed in their interactions with the colonial power and with local representatives. David-Neel first stayed in Sikkim from 14 April to 5 October 1912.⁶⁹ After her arrival in Darjeeling from Calcutta by train, she reached Kalimpong and spent one week

this game of chance and certainly triggered her interest in undocumented Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. On Woodroffe, see Kathleen Taylor, *Sir John Woodroffe, Tantra, and Bengal: 'An Indian Soul in a European Body?'* (London: Routledge, 2013).

65 *Ibid.*, 199.

66 Francis Younghusband, *India and Tibet, 1903–1904* (London: John Murray, 1910).

67 Charles Sherring, *Western Tibet and the British Borderland: The Sacred Country of Hindus and Buddhists; With an Account of the Government, Religion, and Customs of Its Peoples* (London: E. Arnold, 1906).

68 Alex McKay, *Tibet and the British Raj: The Frontier Cadre, 1904–1947* (Richmond: Curzon, 1997).

69 For commented maps of David-Neel’s itineraries, see Désiré-Marchand, *Alexandra David-Neel*, 155–231.

there before going to Gangtok. As the headings of her letters indicate, her entire stay was from then on based in Gangtok. From there, David-Neel made several trips up North, notably one important journey from 28 May to 11 June to Lachen and from there to Thangu on the border of Tibet, and another shorter excursion from 23 to 30 June on the way to the Jelep La Pass (Eastern Sikkim), close to another border point with Tibet (see figure 1). In October, she left Sikkim for Nepal. As I shall explain later, the highlight of David-Neel’s first sojourn certainly was her trip to Lachen and Thangu. There she would both have her first glimpse of the Tibetan landscape and meet a Buddhist lama who would be of crucial importance to her.

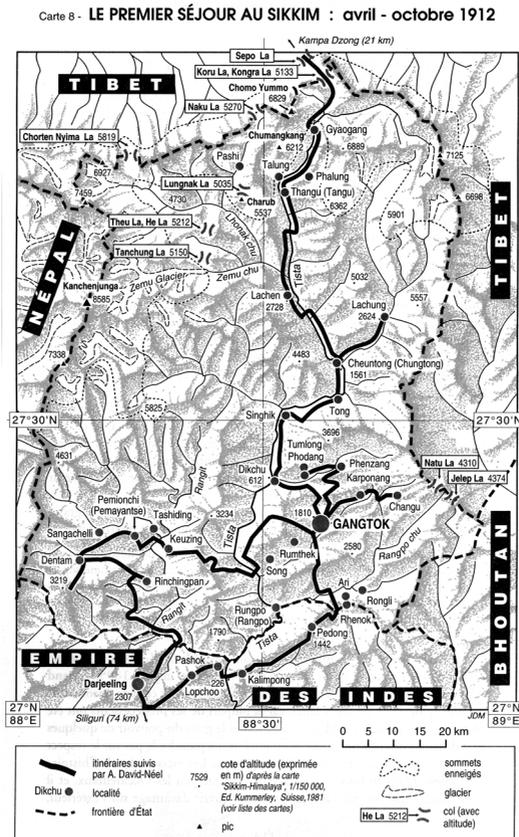


Fig. 1: Alexandra David-Neel’s first sojourn in Sikkim (April–October 1912).⁷⁰

70 Map courtesy of Joëlle Désiré-Marchand, from her book *Alexandra David-Néel: Vie et voyages* (Paris: Arthaud, 2009), 161.

This trip to the border of Tibet deeply affected her second stay in Sikkim. David-Neel came back to the Eastern Himalayas in December 1913 with the intention of going to Bhutan. The trip to Bhutan had to be canceled and David-Neel then decided to stay once again in Sikkim, a stay that ended up lasting almost three years.

Gangtok was again her “base-camp” during the first nine months (7 December 1913–25 August 1914), limiting her explorations to Podang Monastery (a few kilometers North). Her letter dated 28 September 1914 signals that she was in Lonak Valley (“High Himalayas”), a location whose remoteness accounts for the two-month gap in her correspondence since her last letter in August (she had just received her husband’s letters dated 3 and 22 August).⁷¹ After that, her stay was centered in the area of Lachen, where she spent the “winter months” (November 1914–May 1915). She then spent a remarkably long time in high and remote places on the border of Tibet, notably in Dewa Thang between Thangu and Gyaogang, at an altitude of over 13,000 feet (May 1915–August 1916). There she famously lived in a cave before having a cabin built (“De-Chen Ashram,” 1 June 1915–2 July 1916 and August 1916).⁷²

As one can see from this sketch of David-Neel’s itineraries in Sikkim, her first sojourn relied heavily on the colonial structure, while her second sojourn was more erratic until its center of gravity shifted to the farthest edge of the Rāj. The logic of David-Neel’s itineraries clearly reflected her endeavor to distance herself from the Western world, embodied, as she often writes to Philippe, by British authority and colonial community, as well as by missionaries.⁷³

In order to explain the shift revealed by this brief overview and to understand the growing and somehow unexpected appeal that Tibet and “Lamaism” suddenly exerted on the “Buddhist modernist” she claimed to be, we need to go into more detail about two aspects that had considerable impact on her conception of Buddhism and, simultaneously, on her writing practice: firstly, her interactions with some specific figures she met in Sikkim, and secondly, her perception of the landscape.

71 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 329.

72 See Désiré-Marchand, *Alexandra David-Néel*, 200, for a map of this sojourn, the probable location of Dewa Thang (a locality not marked on the maps), and her dwellings in Northern Sikkim along the Tibetan border. For a map of her illegal trip from Chörten Nyima to Shigatse, see *ibid.*, 225.

73 For an analysis of the recurring motif of David-Neel’s ever-displaced “home” (she uses the English word) in her letters, see Margaret McColley, “Alexandra David-Néel’s Home in the Himalayas: Where the Heart Lies,” in *Gender, Genre, and Identity in Women’s Travel Writing*, ed. Kristel Siegel (New York/Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), 279–292.

The “civilized yogi” between British colonials and Asian highnesses

The British community of officials and the missionaries of the Scandinavian Alliance Mission stand at the background of the significant daily events that David-Neel chooses to highlight in her letters. She first praises her European fellows’ kindness and generosity.⁷⁴ However, after her first trip to Lachen, she confesses to her husband in a letter dated 27 July 1912 that they perceived her as a “civilized yogi,” violating colonial social codes by establishing personal “links with natives.”⁷⁵ She counters by quickly distancing herself from the English middle class and the tea parties held in the bungalows on the Himalayan hills: “I did not come here to live among British bourgeois [...] pledged to the missionaries. They are all servants of the politics of the White,” she writes to Philippe.⁷⁶ Fiercely anticlerical, she shows no mercy to Rev. E. H. Owen, whom she considers a poor interpreter of her Tibetan-speaking interlocutors. Owen is, she feels, too concerned with preaching the Gospel in Lachen and taking care of the *Mission House* community to understand anything about Buddhism.⁷⁷

Sir Charles Bell is surprisingly rarely mentioned by David-Neel, although his impact on her travel is significant.⁷⁸ However, she makes no secret of the fact that he is the one who forbids her to “go beyond the frontier that marks the limit of British domination”⁷⁹ at a time when “England is slowly taking hold of Tibet”⁸⁰ and banishes her from Sikkim on her return from her illegal excursion to Shigatse in June 1916. She sadly confesses to her husband that her “adventures” are over and that her “dream” has come to an end, giving a unique and matchless retrospective value to her stay in Sikkim.⁸¹

74 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 153–154 and 165.

75 *Ibid.*, 200–201; in English in the original letter.

76 *Ibid.*, 201.

77 *Ibid.*, 168 and 172. Interestingly enough, she never mentions him in *Mystiques et Magiciens du Tibet*, where Owen has been replaced by her Sikkimese servant as her interpreter with Tibetan lamas at Lachen.

78 Bell and David-Neel obviously had a complex relationship. For instance, Bell refused David-Neel a gun permit. Bell to David-Neel, October 1916, Foreign Department, External, nos.13–16, part B, National Archives of India, Delhi. He had also previously opposed the erection of a hermit house in the palace grounds in Gangtok, which Maharajkumar Sidkeong Tulku intended to have built, as it turns out, for David-Neel before she returned to Sikkim for her second sojourn. Letter from Bell, n.d., SI no. 105, file no. 4/37/1914, Department of Darbar, Sikkim State Archives, Gangtok. For more details on Charles Bell in Sikkim, see Emma Martin, “Charles Bell’s Collection of ‘Curios’: Negotiating Tibetan Material Culture on the Anglo-Tibetan Borderlands (1900–1945)” (PhD diss., SOAS, University of London, 2014). I am grateful to Emma Martin for sharing these sources with me.

79 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 148–149.

80 *Ibid.*, 202 and 398.

81 *Ibid.*, 426.

The British colonial world and some of its main representatives thus offer support for David-Neel's sojourns in Sikkim, but also progressively come to represent the grim side of her encounter with Tibet. In contrast, the bright side is represented by encounters with various prestigious figures that embody the Tibetan world to her. In her first letter after leaving Tunis for Colombo, David-Neel proudly informs her husband that she is "in friendly relationship with Asian highnesses and majesties."⁸² Her encounters with Tibetan monks and dignitaries in Kalimpong, and then in Gangtok or Lachen Monastery, are to be related to her own spiritual quest and conception of Buddhism as well as to her scholarly ambitions. She had already mentioned to her husband when writing to him from India that "there is a highly respectable position to take in French *orientalisme* [Eastern studies]."⁸³ As I will show below, much later, provided with the means to meet her ambitions, she will re-use this exact phrase.⁸⁴

One must remember that David-Neel had been among the Parisian circles as well as the British and German circles of Buddhist studies. French scholars supposedly focused on the study of what was then called the school of Northern Buddhism, or Mahāyāna Buddhism.⁸⁵ The British and the German scholars focused on the so-called orthodox "Southern" Buddhism and tended to give special emphasis to the historicity of the Buddha's life and teaching: in London in 1910, David-Neel met Thomas W. Rhys Davids, already mentioned, and his wife Caroline Augusta Foley (1857–1942),⁸⁶ who considered Buddhism a "science of mind."⁸⁷ The famous British Buddhist scholar had worked in Ceylon and founded the Pali Text Society. He viewed the Pali Buddhist texts that he studied as the most ancient and authentic testimonies on the Buddha's life and message.⁸⁸ David-Neel also corresponded with

82 *Ibid.*, 196.

83 *Ibid.*, 84. She adds that gaining that position would be all the more difficult since she is both a woman and a Buddhist activist (*Ibid.*, 132).

84 *Ibid.*, 332.

85 Sylvain Lévi, "Les parts respectives des nations occidentales dans les progrès de l'indianisme," in *Mémorial Sylvain Lévi* (1924; repr. Paris: Hartmann, 1937), 116–117.

86 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 76–77.

87 Quoted in McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 52.

88 In order to avoid misunderstandings, I would like to make clear that I only intend here to give a brief overview of David-Neel and most of her Western contemporaries' representations and scholarly appropriations of what were at the time called "Northern" and "Southern" Buddhisms. Such categories have long been discounted by Eastern scholars as inaccurate. If many Buddhist reformers at the time held "Southern" or Theravāda Buddhism to be more authentic, this construction does not in turn imply an essentialist equation between Theravāda and modernist reformism or rationalism. See Kate

Hermann Oldenberg (1854–1920),⁸⁹ who, in the wake of Rhys Davids’ text discoveries, focused on Pali sources for stressing the historicity of the Buddha. In his acclaimed 1881 *Buddha: Sein Leben, seine Lehre, seine Gemeinde*, he fiercely argued against French Indologist Émile Senart’s (1847–1928) 1875 theory (*Essai sur la légende du Buddha*) that Buddha was but a historical manifestation of a more universal solar myth. David-Neel proudly writes to Philippe that Oldenberg “praised her” for being the “first in Europe” to “see right through the problem” of “Nirvana as the suppression of the idea of a distinct, separate and permanent personality.”

Although David-Neel expects to find a place in French Buddhist studies, she consistently challenges Western academia (and overall philosophy) and its “dry and dead erudition,”⁹⁰ taking the perspective of a Buddhist practitioner endowed with a unique experience from the inside. At the end of her first sojourn in Sikkim, she sums up her position to Philippe: “You know my projects: be active as an *orientaliste* [Eastern scholar] in a more learned way than previously. Write, teach at *la Sorbonne*. These occupations are in perfect harmony with my position among promoters of the religious reform trend in Asia.”⁹¹ As a modern Buddhist reformer focusing mainly on “Southern” Buddhism so far, David-Neel definitely took an unusual stand in the French intellectual field and tried to insert her public persona on a more transnational level.

In this respect, being allowed to meet Tupten Gyatso (1876–1933), the thirteenth Dalai Lama, is a happy coincidence David-Neel was eager to see happen when she arrived in Darjeeling and heard about the Dalai Lama’s presence in Kalimpong. Thanks to the support of Charles Bell, the Dalai Lama was offered refuge in Sikkim after the Chinese warlord Zhao Erfeng’s (1845–1911) troupes had attacked the Tibetan capital in 1909 and forced him to flee to India. After staying in Darjeeling, the Dalai Lama moved his court to Kalimpong, then a famous hill station and an important trading outpost, until his return to Tibet in June 1912 after the Republican Revolutionaries had overthrown the Qing Dynasty. David-Neel saw this situation as an opportunity to build an exclusive network for the sake of her own scholarly ambitions. At a time when David-Neel was not familiar with the Tibetan language and

Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism: Continuity, Diversity, and Identity* (Oxford: Wiley–Blackwell, 2013). Moreover, reformism was also led by Mahāyāna Buddhists, most notably in Japan, as we have seen.

89 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 155.

90 *Ibid.*, 84.

91 *Ibid.*, 208.

hence, to her own dismay,⁹² was dependent on translators (Sonam Wangfel Laden [1876–1936] on this occasion),⁹³ she was granted an extraordinary audience with “His yellow Highness” as a Western Buddhist, together with two Japanese Buddhists, one being the famous Zen monk and explorer of Tibet, Ekai Kawaguchi (1866–1945). Aware of being the first Western woman to meet the Dalai Lama, David-Neel gives her husband a long account of the meeting and demonstrates how much she had internalized Orientalist stereotypes at this stage, as she writes of the “Pope of Asia”⁹⁴ that “his Tibetan brain hardly grasps that one can become a Buddhist by studying Oriental philosophy on the benches of a European university. That I have not had a guru, a mentor, escapes him. Moreover, I understand, from what he says, that he has a poor knowledge of Southern Buddhism.”⁹⁵

David-Neel explains on this occasion to the Dalai Lama that “Northern Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism in particular were not well received in the West probably because they are misunderstood.”⁹⁶ This is why she “had thought to speak directly to the head of Northern Buddhism in order to get some authoritative clarification on the theories of the Tibetan School.”⁹⁷ The Dalai Lama, who also prompted her to learn Tibetan as soon as possible, would later send written answers to her inquiries through the British Resident in Sikkim, Charles Bell.

In David-Neel’s letters, the episode of her encounter with the Dalai Lama is described over several pages and clearly appears to be the highlight of her stay at Kalimpong as a prestigious gateway to the “threshold of Tibet.”⁹⁸ On the other hand, she hardly mentions it in her personal diary.⁹⁹ She also writes of her encounter with the Dalai Lama in the famous avant-garde literary periodical *Mercure de France*¹⁰⁰ and gives further expositions to British Indian

92 Alexandra David, “Auprès du Dalaï-Lama,” *Mercure de France* 99, no. 367 (1 October 1912): 473–474.

93 Although David-Neel only mentions Laden La briefly in various places, this important Sikkimese official personality of British, Sikkimese, and Tibetan relations also played an important role in the organization of David-Neel’s stay. For a useful biography, see Nicholas G. Rhodes, *A Man of the Frontier: The Life and Times of Sonam Wangfel Laden La* (Kolkata: Mira Bose, 2006).

94 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 144 and 148.

95 *Ibid.*, 146.

96 *Ibid.*, 147.

97 *Ibid.*, 147.

98 *Ibid.*, 229.

99 Jean Chalon, *Le lumineux destin d’Alexandra David-Néel* (Paris: Perrin, 1985), 196.

100 Alexandra David, “Auprès du Dalaï-Lama,” 466–476.

journals at the time.¹⁰¹ Her rhetorical strategy is two-fold: while asserting her own authority over the Dalai Lama as far as Southern Buddhism is concerned, she intends to publicly establish her own authority as an exclusive scholar of Mahāyāna Buddhism. It is thus clear that she expects her meeting with the Dalai Lama to provide her with a new prestige not only in the eyes of her husband, but also in French scholarly circles and the British official community. In this regard, David-Neel dresses like an Indian ascetic so as to “dispirit [British] ladies” and “show symbolically that she was welcomed as an outstanding European woman.”¹⁰² Although she still feels that her convictions are at odds with Lamaism, she confesses to Philippe that “coming back [to Europe] with a study on Lamaism completed by the side of the Dalai Lama would prove a fabulous ‘Orientalist’ piece of work.”¹⁰³ This underlines her ambition to provide the West with her personal experience and first-hand knowledge of Buddhism, but first and foremost to turn Tibetan Buddhism into her own “field of investigation.”¹⁰⁴

David-Neel’s new and ambivalent position deserves attention here, since it is a sign of a transition in her conception of Buddhism. In line with her meeting with the Dalai Lama, she will make immediate arrangements to learn Tibetan and get more familiar with Tibetan Buddhism in Sikkim, while trying to stay true to her reformist spirit. This will be made possible mostly with the help of the Maharaja Thutob Namgyal’s (1860–1914) son, Maharajkumar Sidkeong Tulku Namgyal (1879–1914), with whom she develops a close relationship. Sidkeong Tulku is both the crown prince (Maharajkumar) of Sikkim and the reincarnated abbot (Tulku) of Podang Monastery. David-Neel has long discussions with him on primitive and “authentic” Buddhism in his “incongruous cottage-like and Chinese-looking bijou private house” in Gangtok.¹⁰⁵ After an almost three-year trip through Europe and Asia, Sidkeong Tulku is “given an opportunity to influence Sikkim’s future” as Vice-President of the State Council and is “placed in charge of the departments of education and forests, in addition to being given religious control of the monasteries.”¹⁰⁶

101 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 160 and 165.

102 *Ibid.*, 144–145.

103 *Ibid.*, 144.

104 *Ibid.*, 132. She had published an article on Tibetan theocracy earlier. Alexandra Myrial, “Le pouvoir religieux au Thibet, ses origines,” *Mercure de France* 52, no. 180 (December 1904), 599–618.

105 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 154–157.

106 David-Neel shamelessly claims that Sidkeong Tulku “has been educated in Europe” and plainly describes him as a modern reformer. *Ibid.*, 146–147. On Sidkeong Tulku’s education and travel around the world (1906–1909), and his relationship with the British colonial framework, see Alex McKay, “‘That He May Take Due Pride in the Empire to Which He Belongs:’ The Education of Maharajah

While reading the *Dhammapada*¹⁰⁷ and discussing philosophical questions together with Sidkeong Tulku at Lachung, David-Neel writes that they “planned several useful reforms regarding the lamas, the religious education, etc.” She then adds: “I think that my coming in this country will not be absolutely useless for the population’s progress and instruction.”¹⁰⁸ With the support of Sidkeong Tulku, David-Neel is invited to preach at the monastery of Podang and across Sikkim, and also writes a leaflet to be published in Tibetan.¹⁰⁹ She explains to Philippe that she introduced the Western Buddhist scholarly studies and the spread of Buddhism in the West to the lamas. While lecturing on the doctrines of Mahāyāna and the history of Tibetan Buddhism, notably Tsongkhapa’s “Reform,” she urged the lamas to “rise above the differences between schools and sects, so as to revive the primitive philosophical doctrine.” She then comments on the Buddha’s first sermon, quotes from Pali texts, gives details on the first Buddhist community and explains what a “true member of the Buddhist *sangha*” ought to be.¹¹⁰

It is noteworthy that in the same period, Sidkeong Tulku officially invites another Western Buddhist convert, J. F. McKechnie, aka Silacara Bhikku (1871–1952), whom David-Neel calls the “Scottish *orientaliste* [Eastern scholar]” and a “resolute freethinker and Buddhist atheist,”¹¹¹ to spend some time in Sikkim from February to September 1914. Silacara was the disciple of Nyanatiloka, the German Theravada monk to whom David-Neel was already close, as we have seen, and who will also shortly join this small group of Buddhist reformers in Sikkim.¹¹² Sidkeong’s sudden and premature death in December 1914, just after he had succeeded his father in February as the Maharaja of Sikkim, brings an end to his plans of educational, moral, and ecclesiastical reform.¹¹³ At this time, David-Neel’s views on Tibetan Buddhism were first beginning to change direction through the encounter with Lama Kazi Dawa Samdup (1868–1922), headmaster of the state Bhutia Boarding School at Gangtok and her personal interpreter, appointed by Sidkeong Tulku

Kumar Sidkeon Namgyal Tulku of Sikkim,” *Bulletin of Tibetology* 39, no. 2 (2003): 27–52, here 43.

107 A collection of sayings attributed to the Buddha translated from Pali, most famously featured in Max Müller’s *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. X (Oxford: Clarendon, 1881), 1–95.

108 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 172.

109 *Ibid.*, 165.

110 *Ibid.*, 194–195, see also 185–186, 211 and 337.

111 *Ibid.*, 298, 330, 361, 389.

112 Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West*, 307–308. See also David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 304, 415.

113 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 349–350, 353.

at her arrival in Sikkim. It is only later that Dawa Samdup's name will become famous in the Western world through Walter Y. Evans-Wentz's (1878–1965) publications, notably the bestselling *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* in 1927.¹¹⁴ Through Dawa Samdup, David-Neel discovers many aspects of Tibetan literature such as the story of the Tibetan hermit and poet Milarepa. She plans to collaborate with him on a study on Padmasambhava, "Tibet's great apostle," she says, and an "intriguing character."¹¹⁵ But Dawa Samdup will follow Charles Bell to be his interpreter during the Simla Convention and will only reappear at the end of her stay, in March 1916.¹¹⁶

In the first stage of David-Neel's stay, Sikkim appears as a significant cosmopolitan hub of Buddhist modernism, in which European and Asian Buddhists meet. Moreover, as indicated by David-Neel's acquaintance with Dawa Samdup, and as I would like to elaborate now, Sikkim became an unforeseen "middle ground,"¹¹⁷ where Buddhism took on unprecedented forms in the process of global modernization and was refashioned as a response to the shifting global situation in the context of the World Wars, which put an end to the optimistic impetus of the first wave of modern Buddhism.

At the edge of the world: A Tantric yogi and a Huron hut

David-Neel's encounters with the Dalai Lama, Sidkeong Tulku, and Lama Dawa Samdup on her arrival in Sikkim are followed one month later (May 1912) at Lachen by an encounter with Kunzang Ngawang Rinchen (1867–1947), best known as "the Third Gomchen of Lachen." The "Gomchen" ("Great Yogi") was

114 See Dasho P. W. Samdup, "A Brief Biography of Kazi Dawa Samdup (1868–1922)," *Bulletin of Tibetology* 44, no. 1–2 (2008): 155–158. Before translating Buddhist texts into English, Dawa Samdup served as interpreter for the Maharaja of Sikkim and for Charles Bell, notably during the Dalai Lama's stay and the Simla Convention. His biographer strikingly states that "Kazi Dawa Samdup wanted to propagate Tibetan Buddhism to the world, and especially to the English-speaking world. This required extensive translation of difficult Buddhist and tantric texts into English and heavy publication expenses, which he could not afford. His opportunity came when the famed orientalist Dr W.Y. Evans-Wentz came to see him in Gangtok." (Ibid., 157) Besides the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1927), Evans-Wentz posthumously published Dawa Samdup's other important translations: *Tibet's Great Yogi: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1928), *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935), *Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954). For a survey of the reception of the *Bardo thödol* in the West, see Donald S. Lopez, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

115 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 148–150, 160, 167.

116 Ibid., 412.

117 Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

the abbot of Lachen Monastery, and was well-known for receiving teachings from a lama in Tibet and spending many years as a solitary hermit meditating in remote caves in the mountains. David-Neel grasps from her first encounters with the Gomchen the central point of his teachings, which she precociously and somewhat clumsily describes as “what *Mahayana* calls *Sunyata*: the Great Void, void from the illusion of scattered [*morcelée*] life; infinite, eternal Existence.”¹¹⁸ Whereas David-Neel translates the basic concept of *śūnyatā* in terms of Western concepts and testifies to Western misconceptions of the time (here “void” understood as “immortality” strongly echoes Theosophists’ interpretations of Buddhist doctrines),¹¹⁹ she certainly steps away from her former Buddhist conceptions based on her understanding of Pali texts. Nevertheless, she goes on preaching to the local lamas. The unforeseen events of this period seem to take on an essential meaning, since she writes down, almost for the first time, her own future *nom de plume* in a meaningful transpersonal perspective:

The words which I repeat, the ideas which I venture, the feelings which I express are those of the Buddhas. [...] Their wisdom and compassion have come through the ages [...] to be heard. [...] Padmasambhava and so many others preached in this country. [...] That which speaks, that which took their names, that is called today Alexandra David-Néel.¹²⁰

The encounter with Ngawang Rinchen definitely opens up new insights for David-Neel, and his role intertwines in a remarkably complex way with her own personal quest and persona. In her letters, Ngawang Rinchen is paradoxically as much a crucial character as an elusive figure. She plainly calls the Gomchen the “*Yogi*,” alternatively the “Great *Yogi*” or her “*lama-yogi*”¹²¹ but, conscious of Philippe’s suspicion regarding spiritual matters, she carefully avoids going into the details about their meetings and discussions. However, the *lama-yogi*’s presence lets itself be felt increasingly in her letters at the time of her second sojourn in Sikkim from October 1914 onward, which, as we have seen, was

118 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 169.

119 Franklin, *The Lotus and the Lion*, 74–87. In order to define “nirvana,” Blavatsky evoked a pantheistic “absorption into the great universal soul” and concluded that “Nirvana is the ocean to which all tend.” Helena P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*, vol. 2 (New York: Bouton, 1877), 116 and 639. This phrase obviously inspired Edwin Arnold’s last lines of *The Light of Asia, or The Great Renunciation (Mahābhiniṣkramana): Being the Life and Teaching of Gautama, Prince of India and Founder of Buddhism (As Told in Verse by an Indian Buddhist)* (London: Trübner, 1879), 238. This idea was more clearly drawn from the Hindu “Atman” concept than from Buddhist doxology.

120 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 186. This passage was omitted in *Journal de voyage*, 165.

121 She only mentions the term “*Gompchen*” in January 1915. David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 352.

to take a completely new turn. It is at this time that, having left Gangtok for Lachen, she has a “Huron hut”¹²² built at the foot of the *yogi*’s meditation cave at Dewa Thang, close to the border with Tibet. This move appears to be a decisive step forward in her approach to the practice of Tibetan Buddhism.

In April 1914, David-Neel had lost her Tibetan interpreters because of the Simla conference, but she also did not trust the Western missionaries whom she had used as middlemen so far. A fifteen-year-old Sikkimese boy named Aphur Yongden (1899–1955) offered, on his own initiative, to remedy this awkward situation. As is well-known, from that moment on Yongden and David-Neel would travel in Asia and around the world together, then settle in France and co-write major studies and novels on Tibetan Buddhism, such as *The Secret Oral Teachings* and *The Lama of the Five Wisdoms*.¹²³ Although David-Neel only mentions his name here and there in her letters to her husband at the time,¹²⁴ Yongden’s role is invaluable in her relationship with Ngawang Rinchen. In November 1914, she asks the Gomchen to teach her Tibetan and the study of Tibetan philosophical texts in exchange for English lessons, a deal that he “miraculously” accepts.¹²⁵ She herself declares that “it is a unique opportunity to learn Tibetan quickly and to assimilate doctrines no Eastern scholar has ever understood.”¹²⁶ The Gomchen approves of Sidkeong Tulku’s reformist plans,¹²⁷ and David-Neel feels that his teachings are consistent with her own beliefs: “The Buddhists renounce what is no longer important to them because they have rationally measured its emptiness and nothingness.”¹²⁸

122 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 381.

123 Aphur Yongden and Alexandra David-Néel, *Le lama aux cinq sagesse: Roman tibétain* (Paris: Plon, 1935). Translated by Percy Lloyd and Bernard Miall as *Mipam, the Lama of the Five Wisdoms: A Tibetan novel* (London: John Lane, 1938). See also Alexandra David-Néel and Lama [Aphur] Yongden, *La Connaissance transcendante* (Paris: Adyar, 1958). Aphur Yongden will also write a novel of his own, *La Puissance du Néant* (Paris: Plon, 1954). Translated by Janwillem Van de Wetering as *The Power of Nothingness* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982). For a short biography of Aphur Yongden, see Désiré-Marchand, *Alexandra David-Néel*, 562–572.

124 She merely evokes a “servant” in Gangtok in May 1914 and at Chöten Nyima later in November (David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 311, 335) and then in Kyoto (Ibid., 450). In a similar manner, in *Magic and Mystery*, she credits Lama Bermiag and Kushog Chödszed, whom she met in Gangtok, as her first informants on the conception of death and the beyond in Tibetan Buddhism. David-Néel, *Magic and Mystery*, 27–43. However, in her letters, she merely mentions having tea with one “very learned lama” and “member of the State Council” at Sidkeong Tulku’s house. David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 154–155.

125 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 333.

126 Ibid.

127 Ibid., 344 and 395.

128 Ibid., 334. This is precisely what she believes to be the modernity of Buddhism as compared to the outdated Christian tradition.

However, the *lama-yogi*—whom she sometimes describes as a “fantastic” and “frightening” *Mephisto*¹²⁹—introduces her to an understanding of Buddhism that is at odds with the supposedly “primitive” tradition of Southern Buddhism she herself promoted: “My *lama-yogi*, here, teaches terrifying doctrines and, compared to him, Max Stirner and Nietzsche look like mere *babies* coming out of the nursery school. [...] I have learned more here in fifteen days than in one year in Gangtok.”¹³⁰ David-Neel stops being a proselyte to become the lama’s novice, together with Aphur Yongden, and she surrenders to him the “absolute obedience that he demands.”¹³¹ As the first Western initiate in Tibetan Buddhism, she is given the name of *Yishe Tönme* (Lamp of Wisdom),¹³² and learns to handle the ritual accessories such as the tambourine (*damaru*) used in meditation¹³³ and, while reading Tibetan texts for several hours daily with Ngawang Rinchen and benefitting from his deep knowledge, she also gradually adopts the Tibetan yogis’ methods of meditation and bodily techniques.¹³⁴

129 *Ibid.*, 337–338.

130 Max Stirner and Friedrich Nietzsche were both emblems of the *fin de siècle* nihilism and anarchism that unsettled and disrupted bourgeois conventions and agendas on a global scale. See Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags* (London: Verso, 2005). Before publishing her essay *Les Théories individualistes dans la philosophie chinoise: Yang-Tchou* (Paris: Giard et Brière, 1909), Alexandra David had titled an article on the Chinese philosopher “Un ‘Stirner’ chinois,” *Mercure de France* 76, no. 275 (1 December 1908): 445–452. David-Neel here links European subversive theories and violent activism to Tantric fearsome iconography such as the famous wrathful deities, awe-inspiring ritual practices, and mind-striking formulas and conceptions symbolizing the destruction of the self. See also David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 203. Kasevich condensed this idea in the subtitle of her dissertation “Beyond the Adventure Heroine; Anarcho-Buddhism and the Search for Freedom.” Kasevich, “A Civilized Yogi,” 9. This blend of anarchist ideas and Mahāyāna Buddhism certainly left its mark on Gary Snyder’s socially engaged Buddhism. See Snyder, “Anarchist Buddhism,” *Journal for the Protection of All Beings* 1 (1961), 10–12. For a study on David-Neel’s conception of Vajrayāna Buddhism and especially her understanding of *Prajñāpāramitā* [Perfection of wisdom], a central collection of texts in Mahāyāna and Tibetan Buddhism, see Geneviève James, “La quête mystique d’Alexandra David-Néel: Bouddhiste pratiquante et militante,” in *De l’écriture mystique au féminin* (Laval: Presses universitaires de Laval, 2005), 97–126.

131 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 334.

132 The name *Yishe Tönme* (Tibetan *Yi shes sgron me*, Sanskrit *Prajñāpradīpa*) comes from Madhyamika scholar Bhāviveka’s (c. 490–570) commentary on Nāgārjuna’s (c. 150–250) *Verses on the Middle Way* (*Mūlamadhyamakārikā*). While David-Neel writes to Philippe that she would never have dared to take such a “grandiloquent” name for herself, she will be introduced to the Panchen lama in 1916 and will use it again when traveling in Asia, thus renouncing, as she writes, her “Western personality.” Aphur Yongden will be given the name of *sNying rje rgya mtsho* (Ocean of Compassion). David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 458 and 477. David-Neel also lectured on Buddhism in Adyar and Calcutta under the name of “Sūnyānanda,” (Sanskrit compound meaning “Bliss of Emptiness”). Désiré-Marchand, *Alexandra David-Néel*, 152. She will later publish under this name while staying in the monastery of Kumbum. See e.g. Sūnyānanda, “Buddhist methods of meditation,” *The Buddhist Review* 9, no. 3 (September–December 1917): 164–177. She also adds that she is now called an incarnation of *dākinīs* (female deities) throughout Tibet. David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 252.

133 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 362.

134 *Ibid.*, 297–298.

As David-Neel herself admits, this gives new impulse to her formerly rather fundamentalist conception of Buddhism.¹³⁵ As it turns out, in the esoteric practices of the *Ngagpas* (Tantric practitioners) and in the ritual of *chod* (*gcod*),¹³⁶ she identifies a deep understanding of Buddhist philosophical inquiry: that “all is empty and vain, an illusion and a mirage, and that the ironic performer himself is only a shadow, a ghost devoid of reality.”¹³⁷ These practices appear to her as genuine “methods to reach *tharpa* [supreme liberation], to free oneself from illusion entirely, to erase the mirage of the world as the product of one’s imagination and to liberate one’s mind from fanciful beliefs,” as she will write years later in *With Mystics and Magicians*.¹³⁸ So as to reconcile these practices with her own convictions, she opposes Tantric initiations to the exoteric ritualism of Tibetan Buddhism, which she calls the “Lamaist jumble.”¹³⁹

Thus re-qualified, Tantrism actually becomes the focus of David-Neel’s approach to Tibet. It is only decades later that Western readers will become familiar with this aspect of Tibetan Buddhism through her later books such as *The Secret Oral Teachings in Tibetan Buddhist Sects or Initiations and Initiates in Tibet*.¹⁴⁰ In order to fully understand David-Neel’s statements about Tantric Buddhism, we need to take into account a crucial external historical factor: the First World War, about which she has been kept informed by Philippe and Silacara. In the letters written during her second stay in Sikkim, David-Neel very often comments on the war and justifies staying away from Europe in this critical time.¹⁴¹ In so doing, she suggests how her stay in Sikkim can benefit the desperate situation. She thereby delineates her role as an author-to-be and anticipates the expectations of her potential readership:

Anticlericalism is out of fashion: it is one result of the war. When men are scared they turn to the gods, to the supernatural, like children that hang to their mother’s skirts. A breeze of spirituality

135 Ibid., 252; see also 130.

136 A technique of meditation and set of rituals through which adepts seek to “cut” (*gcod*) through the ego by generating visions in which the body is sacrificed and which ultimately leads to the realization of the non-existence of the self.

137 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 352.

138 David-Néel, *Mystiques et Magiciens*, 165. I translate literally from the French, since the English version is less precise: “[...] to blot out the mirage of the imaginary world [...]” See also *With Mystics and Magicians*, 152.

139 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 235.

140 David-Néel, *Initiations lamaïques* (Paris: Adyar, 1930) Translated by Fred Rothwell as *Initiations and Initiates in Tibet* (London: Rider, 1931).

141 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 322–323, 333–334, 337, 339, 342, 389, 397, 413.

blows over the world alongside with the blast of the cannonballs that rip through the air. Vulgar religiosity will turn into longing for philosophy in the larger-scale minds. I have some idea that my books on Vedanta and Tibetan mysticism are likely to meet the needs of many readers after the storm.¹⁴²

The “cult of nothingness” had first proved a solace for her *fin de siècle* anticlericalism, disillusion, and neurasthenia. The rationalism of Buddhist modernism, as she conceived it, then gave an impulse to her conviction that the pristine teachings of the Buddha were universally relevant to the modern world and must be spread to East and West indiscriminately. The Tantric vision of the Gomchen now appears to her as the most relevant solution to the devastating side-effects of internationalization:¹⁴³ “Now I can only see things, even things as dreadful as this war, as dreams and nightmares. They are only shadows on a cinematographic screen.”¹⁴⁴ “Hence, the one who knows the great secret can only smile at the phantasmagoria that the world is, and the great peace will surround them. [...] Phantasmagoria too is this war.”¹⁴⁵ Hence, David-Neel’s meditation retreat to the edges of Tibet at “De-Chen Ashram,”¹⁴⁶ at the foot of Ngawang Rinchen’s own hermitage, becomes paradigmatic for the message of peace and re-enchantment she feels she has to deliver to the four corners of the earth: “After the war, the literate public is going to wish for something else than narratives about conflicts and disaster. People will long to forget, to live, as little as it can be, in company with dream characters [such as Milarepa and Gesar].”¹⁴⁷

The “Land of Marvels:” The metamorphoses of Tibet’s sacred landscape

David-Neel’s privileged access to the Tibetan esoteric tradition actually finds an echo in the way she starts to consider Tibet as a whole from the Sikkimese threshold. This will help us understand the extent to which her sojourns in Sikkim, especially the second one, are reflected in her future writings, and goes

142 Ibid., 357.

143 On the paradoxical ties between the rise of nationalism and internationalization, and the modern ideas of peace, happiness, and progress, see Anne-Marie Thiesse, *La création des identités nationales* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1999) and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

144 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 392. Time and again she uses the metaphor of the movie screen to translate the profound teaching of the *lama-yogi*, see 226, 300–301, 342, 354, 392.

145 Ibid., 342.

146 Although *bde chen* literally means “the Great Bliss” in Tibetan, she translates it as “the Great Peace.” Ibid., 377.

147 Ibid., 417.

well beyond the mere vulgarization of Tibetan Buddhist doctrines, beliefs, and practices. At the time, Tibetan geography and culture had just started to be discovered in the wake of 1890s Western explorers. While British and French explorers alike described the country in terms of “sacred landscape,”¹⁴⁸ their underlying motivations for doing so differed. In the context of the Great Game, British travelers considered Tibet as a “buffer state” between the British Rāj and Russia. The sacred character ascribed to Tibet amounted, in their view, to a protective power for the imperial territory. In contrast, the French travelers insisted either on the geographical¹⁴⁹ or on the cultural¹⁵⁰ dimension of the Tibetan landscape. The Great Game, as is well known, led to a long period when Tibet was an officially forbidden country.¹⁵¹ Although explorers had contributed significantly to the knowledge of the country in the last decade of nineteenth century, the perception of Tibet remained that of a *terra incognita*, an unknown territory, both geographically and culturally. As such, the “British image of Tibet”¹⁵² seems to have met broader acceptance than the more variegated images of Tibet and Tibetans that other nations such as France presented at the dawn of the twentieth century.¹⁵³

At the first stage of her stay in Sikkim, David-Neel’s vision of Tibet stands out as a transnational representation based on both French and British standards. Like European travelers, she distinguishes the “imagined Tibet” from the “real Tibet” and ascribes a sacred dimension to the country. At odds with her French fellows, she reckons that she shares with the British their appeal for the “other side,” the unknown territory beyond the border of the Rāj. After accompanying Sidkeong Tulku, who was going to Gyantse, to Thangu in May 1912, she wishes she could go back to the border-pass and cross the frontier. She then admits that she is like all the other Europeans in this situation:

148 Peter Bishop, *The Myth of Shangri-La: Tibet, Travel Writing, and the Western Creation of Sacred Landscape* (Los Angeles: University of California Press), 1989, esp. 97–135 and Samuel Thévoz, “Le sacre du paysage tibétain,” *Géographie et cultures* 80 (2011): 169–191, <http://gc.revues.org> [Accessed on 3. June 2016].

149 See for example Fernand Grenard, *Tibet: The Country and Its Inhabitants* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1904), 91–149.

150 See especially Jacques Bacot, *Le Tibet révolté: Vers Népémakö, la Terre promise des Tibétains* (Paris: Hachette, 1912).

151 Peter Hopkirk, *Trespassers on the Roof of the World: The Secret Exploration of Tibet* (London: John Murray, 1982), 5–19 and 220–236.

152 Alex McKay, “Truth, Perception, and Politics: The British Construction of an Image of Tibet,” in *Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections, and Fantasies*, ed. Thierry Dodin and Heinz Rāther (London: Wisdom, 2001), 67–89.

153 Samuel Thévoz, “The French for Shangri-La: Tibetan Landscape and French Explorers,” *French Cultural Studies* 25, no. 2 (May 2014): 103–120.

Here, all the Europeans are under this strange spell. They say "Tibet" almost in a low voice, in a religious way, somewhat fearfully. I shall see it again at another border, but this will be the Tibet of Chumbi Valley. And the Resident [i.e. Charles Bell] warned me that it is a false Tibet as green as the Sikkimese valleys and without the roughness of the fearful and spellbinding true Tibet I have contemplated.¹⁵⁴

While Tibet appears in British imperial fantasies as a harsh borderland and a blank "buffer state" and in Theosophical projections as an unearthly abode of hidden spiritual masters and supernatural powers, the Tibet David-Neel dreams of takes on new connotations. In so doing, she not only borrows from previous representations given by travelers but also appropriates these representations. Her letters reveal the ambiguous and somewhat distant view she takes of the way her European fellows envision what used to be called the "land beyond." On a second journey through upper Sikkim in August 1912, she realizes that she is the "prisoner of a dream, attracted by who knows what..." She adds: "I wish I could go to the end of my journey and write the books I have dreamed of."¹⁵⁵ As already noticed in various places, she thus proves quite lucid about the issues she has to raise in order to be acknowledged as a distinct literary writer. Indeed, she later envisions exploring the "hazy beyond"¹⁵⁶ in a way that stands apart from her predecessors:

I have visions of Himalaya, of lakes mirroring snowy peaks, of cascades in the woods. [...] Tibet! Tibet! A part of me remained up there in the high steppes, in the barren loneliness of Gyao-guwn where, perhaps recklessly, I have proffered the "vow that binds" as do Tibetans think. Ten years too late! I confess that I was burned by desire in front of this closed door, opened for me. The desire to seize this unique occasion, to go and learn there what none of the few explorers had been able to get in touch with, to do what no European had ever done.¹⁵⁷

David-Neel's dream of Tibet is one that gives a twist to the geographical category of the "real Tibet:" she gives a spiritual dimension to it, while at the same time the Tibet she is bound to is also the promise of self-realization. Here and there she insists on Himalayas and Tibet as a wilderness which "speaks the same

154 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 180–181 (emphasis mine).

155 *Ibid.*, 220–221.

156 *Ibid.*, 420.

157 *Ibid.*, 261.

language” as the Sahara her husband lives close to.¹⁵⁸ She gives it a spiritual meaning that links it to the medieval *topos* of the desert, but finds new religious models to express it: “It is one of the dreadful and spectacular aspects of what Indian philosophers call *Māya*, an illusion, the mirage of the material world.”¹⁵⁹

In this respect, David-Neel believes her link to Tibet to be of an ontological nature: “I have been a nomad of Central Asia in one of my previous lives, as my Oriental friends enjoy to say for fun.”¹⁶⁰ This however is a serious matter to her: “Indeed, I clearly get recollections of it, remote and deep inside myself, up there in the wide steppes.” She adds that “in [her] veins” she “for sure” has the “atavism of an Asiatic nomad” and may have been a “great Tibetan lama in the past.”¹⁶¹ This explains why “she has felt nostalgia for Asia before she ever went there” and that although she was “born a Parisian” she is “endowed with such a mentality so alien to the one of her native *milieu*.”¹⁶²

David-Neel’s letters attest to a heterogeneous set of representations of Tibet in the first decades of the twentieth century. First and foremost, her commitment to Buddhism and her scholarly ambitions give an unexpected twist to the categories of “real Tibet” she inherited from her predecessors and fellows. In this respect, her vision of Tibet is not only the transnational product of two different traditions in the history of European representations, but is thoroughly transformed by her actual field experience and personal encounter with Sikkimese landscapes and people.¹⁶³ In the process, her exploration clearly takes a metaphorical flair that turns the categories of “imagined Tibet” and “real Tibet” upside down and blurs their conceptual definitions. While the primary meaning of “real Tibet” should refer to what one knows of the place once one has come into contact with it—at the time, what the explorers had seen and written about Tibet—“imagined Tibet” refers to fantasies about it, like those about unknown or utopian lands. Through her insight into the Tantric tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, David-Neel pictures “real Tibet” as the “land of marvels.”¹⁶⁴ In this respect, she suggests that the Himalayan

158 Ibid., 343 and 412–413.

159 Ibid., 376.

160 Ibid., 343.

161 Ibid., 365.

162 Ibid., 365–366.

163 In terms of methodological and theoretic issues, these arguments tend to qualify, and to some extent contradict, the making of the “myth of Shangri-La” as propounded by Bishop, *The Myth of Shangri-La* and Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La*.

164 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 285. The original French expression “pays des prestiges”

landscape is endowed with special qualities that resonate with her own vision of the world. Reflecting on her everyday life in the remote mountains beside the *lama-yogi* she writes to Philippe:

Everything is but a dream! Is it not a dream for a Parisian woman to be here on this steep mountain slope, sleeping on a camp bed and living in the only company of a prodigious sorcerer who spent more than twenty years of his life isolated in the wilderness, who lived in cemeteries, who ate corpses, what do I know? Is it not unlikely? How would I not call it a dream?¹⁶⁵

On the threshold of Tibet, the Himalayan mountain landscape, as she describes it, encapsulates the Tantric visions that she has experienced with the Gomchen. “The *Buddha* saw something. [...] My *lama-yogi* ‘saw’ too. [...] In study and meditation, I seek to see what the Buddhas have seen.”¹⁶⁶ The vision develops throughout her perception of the Tibetan landscape as a means to unbind her attachment to “the world, the civilization and its conventions” and as an image of impermanence.¹⁶⁷

At this key point in Tibetan and European intercultural history, David-Neel remarkably reverses the paradigm of geographical discovery into an exploration of a new kind, as she confesses to Philippe: “If I can transcribe this vision in a lived and lively way as the [Buddhas and the *lama-yogi*] have, then maybe is it worthwhile for me to write and speak.”¹⁶⁸ Ten years before she actually entered Tibet and became famous as the first European woman to get to Lhasa, on the Sikkimese threshold she developed a set of images representative of the “magical Tibet,”¹⁶⁹ better known to us from her later travel narratives. These testify to a substantially different approach to Buddhism from the reformist conceptions David-Neel brought to Sikkim and, as we shall see, are a direct reflection of the familiarity with Tibetan Buddhism that she acquired in contact with actual Tibetan Buddhists and the renewed agenda that she had previously revealed in her private letters to Philippe.

is ambiguous and refers both to the meaning of “prestige” in a sociological sense and “marvel” in a supernatural sense. The ambiguity appears to be strikingly fruitful here.

165 Ibid., 335–336.

166 Ibid., 394.

167 Ibid., 159, 341, 424–425.

168 Ibid., 394.

169 Frédéric Lenoir, *La rencontre du bouddhisme et de l'Occident* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999), 211–239. See also Martin Brauen, *Traumwelt Tibet: Westliche Trugbilder* (Haupt: Bern, 2000). Translated as *Dreamworld Tibet: Western Illusions* (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2004).

A symbolic birthplace: A retrospective mise-en-scène

Having succeeded in entering Lhasa in 1924, David-Neel and Aphur Yongden return triumphantly to France. Right after the success of David-Neel's travel narrative *My Journey to Lhasa* in 1927 (the English version was published prior to the French edition), she has a Tibetan-style house built at Dignes-les-bains, mirroring in some way Sidkeong Tulku's partly Asian, partly British house in Kalimpong. There she writes the well-known bestsellers—more than thirty books—that will reward her with financial security and a wide readership. *With Mystics and Magicians in Tibet* ranks among her most successful works.¹⁷⁰ The first lines of this book provide a retrospective tribute to Sikkim,¹⁷¹ which gives a good example of the reflection of David-Neel's encounter with Mahāyāna Buddhism in her writing style. Kalimpong, the gateway to Sikkim on the border with British India, appears here at the very forefront of the narrative of David-Neel's discovery of “real Tibet and its religious world.”¹⁷² The readers familiar with *My Journey to Lhasa* now become acquainted with the dream-like tone she had given to her letters from Sikkim, which were inspired by the “psychic atmosphere”¹⁷³ of the philosophical “fairy tale”¹⁷⁴ she had been steeped in. She thus tells her readers what she had already told her husband seventeen years earlier. But now the dream forms the matrix of the book: in her narrative, the dream is now the beginning of all things concerning Asia, while concrete encounters tend to lose importance.

The narrative reconstructs the travel as an epiphany in which Kalimpong plays the function of the symbolic doorway that gives access to the other side of reality and to ultimate truth. Here, the once essential figures that gave her access to Tantric Buddhism fade out and give way to the core matter of the book: a collection of picturesque and fairy stories on magicians, sorcerers, and Tantric ascetics with their supernatural powers and esoteric practices. The accounts are scarcely (or not at all) related to their sources, and the events are only loosely connected to the time and space of the travel experience. Her readers proved to be eagerly receptive to these modern fantasy tales on death and the beyond, gathered in a rhapsodic narrative held together by the authoritative “I” of the narrator rather than by a clear distinction between

170 On this period of intense publishing and lecturing, see Désiré-Marchand, *Alexandra David-Néel*, 387–404.

171 David-Neel, *With Mystics and Magicians*, 9.

172 *Ibid.*, 27.

173 *Ibid.*, 80.

174 *Ibid.*, 151.

reality and fiction.¹⁷⁵ David-Neel had succeeded in finding the right literary style to reconcile her conception of art and her Buddhist *imaginaire*.

Since David-Neel's early literary attempts, notably so in the unpublished semi-autobiographical novel *Le Grand Art*, written in 1896 when she was still active as an opera singer under the name of Alexandra Myrial, she had been developing a literary approach that prepared the ground for her later works: "Through art, as a messenger of dream, I could bring to the world the ability to temporarily forget day-to-day trivia [...], I could lead souls to the realm of illusion where secret aspirations and repressed desires hide: everything that is beauty and grandeur in the human mind."¹⁷⁶ Nevertheless, as we have seen in her letters, Sikkim was the birthplace of her literary agenda as a Buddhist writer who, without betraying her former convictions, develops a new strategy, using fiction that allowed her to meet the public's expectations in the traumatic post-war period, on a global scale.¹⁷⁷

While David-Neel's overall understanding and presentation of Buddhism was substantially modified by her encounter with Sikkim,¹⁷⁸ her popularizing work on Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism such as *With Mystics and Magicians* certainly contributed to the success of her adventure narratives and novels. She thus became a popular writer of a special kind, one who claimed to combine the

175 According to Denys' *Alexandra David-Néel au Tibet*, the editor explicitly asked David-Neel to stuff her adventure narratives and novels with such anecdotes. Denys, who was her former librarian in Digne, accused her of fraud and claimed that her accounts amounted to falsification and pure deception. See Mills, *Discourses of Difference*, 125–153. I contend here that the questions of authenticity and authority need to be asked in different terms.

176 Alexandra Myrial, *Le Grand Art: Mœurs de théâtre; Journal d'une actrice* [High art: Memoirs of an actress], quoted in Désiré-Marchand, *Alexandra David-Néel*, 38 (my translation).

177 Her works are sustained throughout by her conception of fiction. Significantly, she deliberately qualified several of her writings as "novels:" *The Lama of the Five Wisdoms* is a "Tibetan novel," *Magie d'amour et Magie noire* (Paris: Plon, 1938. Translated by Vidal l'Estrange as *Tibetan Tale of Love and Magic* [Jersey: Neville Spearman, 1983]) takes the form of a novel, although she warns the reader that "the novel has been lived." Aphur Yongden also published *The Power of Nothingness* as a novel.

178 A telling example is provided by *Le bouddhisme du Bouddha: Ses doctrines, ses méthodes et ses développements mahāyānistes et tantriques au Tibet* (Paris: Plon, 1936). [Translated by H. N. N. Hardy and Bernard Miall as *Buddhism: Its Doctrines and Its Methods*, with a foreword by Christmas Humphreys (London: John Lane the Bodley Head, 1939)]. Although the title suggests that it is only a revised edition of her 1911 *Le bouddhisme du Bouddha et le modernisme bouddhiste*, the content and argument clearly depart from her previous modern Buddhist agenda, as indicated by the French subtitle *Its doctrines, methods, and Mahayanist and Tantric developments in Tibet*. In the first chapter, called "The Buddha," David-Neel points out from the start that, contrary to other philosophical doctrines and religions, Buddhism is not based on and does not need a biography of its founder. She then revisits the fundamental notions of Buddhism (suffering and the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the Dependent Origination, Karma, Nirvana); while she comments on them from the point of view of Tibetan interpreters, she insists throughout that Tibetan doctrines are consistent with the Buddha's original teachings.

authority of a Buddhist convert and of a scholar floating on the margins of French and British Buddhist studies: in the eyes of the public this double aura gave its flair to her books, which were for the most part immediately or rapidly translated into English. It certainly accounts for the international success of “visions of Himalaya,”¹⁷⁹ in which the distinction between “real Tibet” and “imagined Tibet” is blurred even after she actually crossed its geographical perimeter. Although Tibet was by then no longer uncharted territory, this vision lingers in David-Neel’s writings on a metaphorical level. In the post-First-World-War and Second-World-War eras, it is this vision, as David-Neel herself foresaw in Sikkim, that helped turn Tibet into one of the most obvious and essential repositories of Buddhism. Tibet was no longer a repellent “Lamaist” country. At a time when Tibet as a state remained an “unsolved question in the international arena”¹⁸⁰ and was an indefinitely restricted area, it appeared to David-Neel’s readers—as Allen Ginsberg, reading *With Mystics and Magicians* (quoted above in the introduction), clearly testifies—to hide one of the most appealing bodies of spiritual wisdom available to the modern world.

Conclusion: Broadcasting Tibet, or the Sikkimese ways of global Buddhism

In *With Mystics and Magicians*, David-Neel not only credits Sikkim with her encounter with Tibet, but also uses her stay in Sikkim as an introduction to the literary tone and manner that she will become famous for. David-Neel’s letters from Sikkim give us access to the gradual development of her vision of Tibet. In this vision, the beholder—the traveler’s and writer’s pervasive “I”—and the show—the world, the others, the landscape, the beyond—alike are put into perspective, transcended, and eventually delocalized.

Such a vision was to become a standardized pattern of globalized Buddhism in the twentieth century. Its roots and emergence in David-Neel’s discourse should actually be given a broader perspective if we wish to consider more closely the global issues of her Sikkimese experience. An alternative angle from which to look at David-Neel’s modernist self-fashioning and worldwide success is found in *The Way of the White Clouds*, a famous travel narrative by another Western Buddhist modernist, Anagarika Govinda (German-born Ernst Lothar Hoffmann, 1898–1985). He was a Theravada *bhikku* who later turned to Tibetan Buddhism. He became a disciple of the Gomchen of Lachen twenty years after David-Neel had stayed at the monastery of Lachen. In

179 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 261.

180 Dibyesh Anand, “Strategic Hypocrisy: The British Imperial Scripting of Tibet’s Geopolitical Identity,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 68, no. 1 (2009): 227–252.

his book, Govinda collects the Gomchen's memories of the French pioneer and recalls "the famous French *Orientalist* [Eastern scholar] and explorer Alexandra David-Neel, whose books on Tibet were so outstanding that they were translated into all the major languages of the world." His account of her stay in Sikkim deserves attention here:

The profound knowledge that informed her books, which for the first time gave an objective account of hitherto unknown spiritual practices and psychic phenomena, were the direct outcome of these three years of study and meditation under the Great Hermit, who thus—with unfailing certainty—had chosen the right medium for broadcasting his message over the entire world, without himself ever leaving his far-off retreat among the snows of the Himalayas. With this "message" I do not mean a message of any personal nature or the propagation of any particular doctrine, but a message which opened the eyes of the world to the hitherto hidden spiritual treasures of Tibetan religious culture.¹⁸¹

Govinda's statement indirectly suggests that one might have to reevaluate the subjective feature of David-Neel's tone and the literary indeterminacy of her adventure narratives.¹⁸² From his perspective, her books are best considered as a collection of quotations of the Gomchen of Lachen, a crucial figure whom we have seen bound up in a complex way with David-Neel's spiritual quest and public persona. Ngawang Rinchen, like Kazi Dawa Samdup, was obviously aware of the geopolitical situation of Sikkim and of the framework modern Buddhism was likely to offer to Tibetan Buddhism. He definitely had some agency in broadcasting his teachings: David-Neel repeatedly makes clear in her letters that he carefully chose the texts they would read together, interpreted for her the rituals she would witness or perform, and gave her permission or forbade her to publish certain Tantric texts. Had he wished to do so, his coming to Europe would have attracted an enthusiastic audience.¹⁸³

Moreover, David-Neel's books obey a fundamentally global logic, since through them the *lama-yogi's* "secret oral teachings" found a transcultural *form* to meet the modern world and circulate across the translingual networks

181 Anagarika Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds* (1966; repr., New York: Overlook, 2006), 154.

182 For a study of David-Neel's writings as an "exploration of voice" moving toward a "transcendent self," see Robert William II Jones, "Of Offal, Corpses, and Others: An Examination of Self, Subjectivity, and Authenticity in Two Works by Alexandra David-Neel" (PhD diss., Florida Atlantic University, 2010).

183 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 414.

of twentieth-century written literature.¹⁸⁴ In this respect, it is a fitting reversal of roles that, almost a century after David-Neel introduced herself as a Buddhist reformer to the thirteenth Dalai Lama, His Holiness the fourteenth Dalai Lama, a major figure of Buddhism today, wrote the foreword to a recent edition of *My Journey to Lhasa*, paying homage to “the first to introduce the real Tibet to the West” and “to convey the authentic flavor of Tibet as she found it.”¹⁸⁵

When David-Neel came back to Europe, she did not adopt the scheme of transmission perpetuated by many of the contemporary Buddhist modernists and leading intellectuals: she did not turn into a Buddhist lama (unlike Anagarika Govinda or more recently Matthieu Ricard), did not accept any disciples, and no longer preached Buddhism. She did not found communities or get involved in Buddhist institutional structures. She nonetheless went on writing about Buddhism throughout her life. As Govinda suggested, Sikkim, rather than France or Europe, gave birth to and literally produced Alexandra David-Neel’s authorial voice, offering her a new and lasting career-path. But David-Neel implicitly rejected the idea of being a “vessel” merely delivering a message; rather, she chose to be a cultural *translator* of Tantric Buddhism and strove to devise an appealing form for the requirements of the modern era through written literature. Martin Baumann, a social historian of religions, has recently identified a shift in modern Buddhism during the interwar period: mainly an intellectual and aesthetic phenomenon before the First World War, modern Buddhism was then still a “thin” transnational network, implying dissociated and distant written transactions. In the post-war period, modern Buddhism became a “thick” global establishment, implying practical, existential, day-to-day commitment that was focused on meditation both as self-cultivation and physical training.¹⁸⁶ David-Neel’s trajectory and work complicate this schematization. As a pivotal figure in the history of global Buddhism,

184 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1996), 27–47; Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” *New Left Review* 1 (January–February 2000): 55–67. As far as Western Buddhist literature is concerned, some scholars have recently begun to pay attention to the ties between literature and Buddhism: Franklin, *The Lotus and the Lion*; Jeff Humphries, *Reading Emptiness: Buddhism and Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999); John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff, eds., *Writing as Enlightenment: Buddhist American Literature into the Twenty-First Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001); Lawrence Normand and Alison Winch, *Encountering Buddhism in Twentieth-Century British and American Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Heinrich Detering, ed., *Der Buddha in der deutschen Dichtung: Zur Rezeption des Buddhismus in der frühen Moderne* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2014).

185 Tenzin Gyatso, foreword to *My Journey to Lhasa*, by Alexandra David-Neel (New York: Perennial Currents, 2005), i.

186 Martin Baumann, “Modernist Interpretations of Buddhism in Europe,” in David L. McMahan, ed., *Buddhism in the Modern World* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 119–135.

David-Neel holds a special position among other “Western Buddhist pioneers” as a committed lay Western Buddhist story-teller, a cosmopolitan “rhapsodist” similar to the bards who freely adapted the life story of the cultural hero Gesar and transmitted this epic cycle across Tibet, the Himalayas, and Mongolia.¹⁸⁷

In the process, did not her own pen name and public persona come to overshadow her guru on the stage of global Buddhism in the twentieth century? While David-Neel has been widely acclaimed as the “greatest explorer of the twentieth century”¹⁸⁸ and praised for her determination and will power, the multiple and unforeseen encounters in Sikkim that had such lasting impact on her trajectory in the long run did manage to create a polyphonic narrative. Her *lama-yogi*’s teachings on the threshold of the “land of marvels” had already prompted her to write to Philippe, who had first come to know her as an actress and a novelist: “There is no ‘self’ or ‘others,’ there is only an eternal dream that goes on, giving birth to transient characters, fictional adventures.”¹⁸⁹ In *With Mystics and Magicians*, as we have seen, she still maintained that she “hears [her]self as if [she were] listening to some other person.” Ultimately, this *sūnyavâdin*’s (follower of the way of emptiness) understanding of reality and the self¹⁹⁰ fittingly defines the specific way Alexandra David-Neel’s encounter with the remote Sikkimese highlands affected her Buddhist modernist views and contributed to the advent of global Buddhism.

187 See her introduction to *La Vie surhumaine de Guésar de Ling, le héros thibétain, racontée par les bardes de son pays*, co-authored with Aphur Yongden (Paris: Adyar, 1931).

188 Désiré-Marchand, *Alexandra David-Néel*, backcover.

189 David-Néel, *Correspondance*, 392, epigraph of the present paper.

190 *Ibid.*, 342.