

FRED CAMPOY & MATHIEU BLANCHOT

A LIFE WITH ALEXANDRA DAVID-NÉEL

BOOK II



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Authors: Fred Campoy, Mathieu Blanchot

Translation: Dakota Bigot



616 Corporate Way

Valley Cottage, New York

www.discoverypublisher.com

editors@discoverypublisher.com

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script by Fred CAMPOY (based on Marie-Madeleine Peyronnet's book)

visuals by Fred CAMPOY & Mathieu BLANCHOT

colors by Mathieu BLANCHOT

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Foreword...

This wonderful comic by Fred Campoy and Mathieu Blanchot tells the life of an exceptional woman, Alexandra David-Néel, through the eyes of her old friend and partner, Marie-Madeleine Peyronnet. Beyond her incredible journey, well told and illustrated in this series, I would like to explain in a few words why Alexandra was a key figure in the expansion of Buddhism in the West.

As an anarchist and atheist, but also initiated into “esoteric Buddhism” by the Theosophical Society, Alexandra David-Néel represents a key transition between the legacy of the nineteenth century — which interpreted Buddhism in a very rational or, on the contrary, in an excessively esoteric manner — and the spread of a new wave of Buddhism in the West in the aftermath of the World War II, marked by the stamp of experience and pragmatism.

During this long journey to the East, Alexandra learned from Tibetan yogis what no book could offer her: learning to meditate. Therefore, she wrote in 1921: “Meditation is the fundamental basis of the Buddhist’s life, the basis of the Buddhist doctrine, which itself comes from the meditation of its founder, Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha. In the same way that a man who does not pray cannot logically be called a Christian, the one who does not meditate has no right to call himself a Buddhist.”

Half a century prior to the 1960s, the French explorer and Orientalist already predicted what would be the dominant mark of the interest in Buddhism of many

young people coming from the counter-culture movement: a spiritual path that allows to work on oneself, self-awareness, and self-transformation. Once again, the modernity of Buddhism is underlined by these new Western disciples. According to Matthieu Ricard (*The Monk and the Philosopher*, 1999), the inner experience encouraged by Buddhist meditation is conceived as a true “inner science” that can answer the great questions of existence and help the individual to find true happiness.

This personal pursuit of happiness, which lies at the heart of psychological modernity, is also the central axis of the Buddhism approach, which is perceived by Westerners as rigorous and pragmatic. Buddhism has a decisive advantage, which is to virtually encourage personal happiness throughout work on oneself, which involves all the dimensions of the person: physical body, imagination, emotions, psyche, and mind.

Alexandra David-Néel was really the first Westerner to understand this challenge because not only was she a true Buddhism scholar, but also because she practiced it assiduously to transform her life.

Frédéric Lenoir



The most famous and adventurous of French adventurers. Half a century after her death, Alexandra David-Néel (1868-1969) continues to amaze. She was a woman who fulfilled a childhood dream, and what a dream! She entered the heart of Asia and reached the Forbidden City of Lhasa. And to do that, she traveled more than ten years along the roads of the East, crossing the Himalayas, learning the dialects of Tibet – a kingdom that was then free from the Chinese occupation, but closed to Europeans. Certainly, a prodigious adventure, but one that Fred Campoy does not limit himself to. In *A Life With Alexandra David-Néel*, Campoy explores both Mysterious Tibet as well as the disconcerting personality of the adventurer. She reveals her true self in the last years of her life through conversations with Marie-Madeleine Peyronnet, her handmaid whom she fascinated and tyrannized at the same time. Alexandra was then old and feeble, but had not addressed any of her contradictions: very early on in her life, she converted to Buddhism, discussed with the Dalai Lama, and translated numerous sacred texts, but has she really followed all the studied precepts? Full of dreams and dissatisfaction, she was like those Westerners who went on adventure on the roads of the world, going deep into the unknown to find something new. Asceticism and meditation did not allow her to reach self-detachment and inner peace. It is finally through literature – this comic testifies to this with great humor! — that Alexandra is able to reach a form of eternity.

Laurent Vissière
Paris-Sorbonne University,
Member of the editorial committee of *Historia*.

The music on page 23 is from the opera *Faust* by Charles Gounod.

The quote on page 83 is from *La Lampe de sagesse (The Lamp of Wisdom)* by Alexandra David-Néel © 2006, Éditions du Rocher.

The letters on pages 84 and 85 are from *Correspondance avec son mari 1904-1941 (Correspondence with her husband 1904-1941)*, Alexandra David-Néel © 2000, Plon





FOR A FEW WEEKS NOW, HER RHEUMATIC CONDITION HAVING WORSENER, ALEXANDRA HAS NOT LEFT HER OFFICE ON THE SECOND FLOOR. WE ARE GAZING AT THE AUTUMN IN ALL ITS BEAUTY... ALEXANDRA IS WATCHING THE SCENERY AND YET, SHE APPEARS TO BE FAR FROM HERE...

I SHOULD HAVE DIED THERE,
IN THE CHANGTANG, ON THE IMMENSE
GRASSY SOLITUDE, NEAR THE GREAT
TIBETAN LAKES...



AS A BED, THE SOIL, THE GRASS OR THE
SNOW... AS A CANOPY, THE CANVAS OF MY
TENT AND THE HEAVENLY SKIES... IT WOULD
HAVE BEEN A BEAUTIFUL DEATH...

... BUT THE
GODS DECIDED
OTHERWISE...



... AND I AM GOING TO GET
WHAT I ABSOLUTELY DID NOT WANT, A
BAD AND FOOLISH DEATH...



BUT HOW SAD IT IS FOR HER TO COME BACK TO
REALITY! TO FIND HERSELF STILL IN THE SAME
ARMCHAIR, ALMOST COMPLETELY DISABLED, AND
ACCOMPANIED ONLY BY ME...

THAT DEEP PAIN, SHE DID NOT HAVE TO TELL ME
ABOUT IT, FOR NOT ONLY DID I UNDERSTAND IT,
BUT I ALSO SHARED THE SAME FEELING.

... SIMPLY
AN UNWORTHY
DEATH!



HOW MANY TIMES DID SHE TELL ME ABOUT HER DEEP REGRET FOR NOT HAVING DIED THERE...

THE HAPPIEST DAYS ARE THOSE
WHEN, WITH MY BACKPACK, I WANDERED THROUGH THE
MOUNTAINS AND VALLEYS, IN THE WONDERFUL
"LAND OF SNOWS" ...



MADAM, WHY ARE
YOU THINKING OF DEATH
ON THIS BEAUTIFUL
AFTERNOON?



YOU ARE IN PERFECT HEALTH! AT LUNCHTIME, YOU HAD A GARGANTUAN MEAL! TELL ME ABOUT YOUR TRAVELS, IT WILL AMUSE ME MUCH MORE THAN HEARING YOU TALK ABOUT YOUR FUTURE CREMATION...



IT IS YOUR FAULT IF I INSIST SO MUCH ON THIS. YOU WON'T DO WHAT I ASK YOU!



BUT TELL ME, HOW DO YOU EXPECT ME TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR KEEPING YOU DEAD, ALONE WITH ME, FOR TEN DAYS, WITHOUT CALLING A DOCTOR OR REPORTING YOUR DEATH?

EVEN IF YOU WROTE ME A LETTER TO COVER MY RESPONSIBILITY, I WILL NEVER DO THAT!

SEE, YOU ARE REFUSING!



YES, I ABSOLUTELY REFUSE TO DO THAT! TELL ME, WOULD YOU STAY TEN ENDLESS NIGHTS AND DAYS NEXT TO A DECAYING CORPSE? THIS IS ABSOLUTELY EVIL!

BUT I ALREADY EXPLAINED TO YOU THAT SEVERAL MEMBERS OF MY FAMILY HAVE BEEN IN A STATE OF LETHARGY FOR MANY DAYS, AND I HAVE SEEN WITH MY OWN EYES, IN TIBET, A MAN, WHO WAS THOUGHT TO BE DEAD, WAKE UP ON THE STAKE!



I KNOW THAT, AND WHEN HE WAS TAKEN OUT OF THE FIRE, HE SAID: "FOR ONCE I HAD WARM FEET!"

THIS IS NOT A JOKE, I AM AFRAID OF BEING BURNED ALIVE... SO, DO NOT FORGET TO CUT THE VEINS IN MY ARMS AS WELL...



AND THEN WHAT?! AND WHAT WILL THE DOCTOR SAY WHEN HE FINDS YOU WITH YOUR WRISTS SLASHED AND IN SUCH A STATE OF DECAYING? HE WILL CALL THE POLICE AND I WILL GO TO JAIL WHILE WAITING FOR THE AUTOPSY RESULT!



HERE YOU ARE! ALWAYS THINKING ABOUT YOURSELF...

WELL, ENOUGH OF THIS STUPID DISCUSSION! YOU ARE NOT IN TIBET AND YOU WILL NEVER BE "BAKED" IF YOU ARE NOT REALLY DEAD, I PROMISE YOU THAT I WILL MAKE SURE OF THAT MYSELF! NOW, YOU JUST CONTEMPLATE THIS WONDERFUL SUNSET WHILE I GO AND GET SOME TEA...





ALEXANDRA IS NOW RADIANT, AS SHE IS EVERY TIME SHE TALKS ABOUT HER BAD TEMPER. BY THE WAY, SHE SHOULD HAVE EVERY REASON TO BE SATISFIED BECAUSE IT IS HER TEMPER THAT HAS MADE HER SUCCEED EVERYTHING SHE HAS UNDERTAKEN. SHE TAKES SIPS OF HER ROSE-COLORED TEA. ABSORBED BY THE SPECTACULAR SCENERY THAT APPEARS BEFORE HER EYES, SHE SAYS...



THE CITY WAS FORBIDDEN TO FOREIGNERS AND NO EUROPEAN WOMAN HAD EVER ENTERED IT. IT WAS A GREAT CHALLENGE, AND I ABSOLUTELY WANTED TO GIVE IT A TRY.



TWICE, THE TIBETAN ARMY HAD DRIVEN ME BACK TO THE BORDERS. SO, I DISTANCED MYSELF BY TRAVELING FOR A WHILE TO JAPAN, KOREA AND CHINA. AND IT WAS IN JAPAN THAT I MET A PHILOSOPHER MONK WHO BROUGHT ME A GLIMPSE OF HOPE: A FEW YEARS EARLIER, DRESSED UP AS A CHINESE MONK, HE MANAGED TO STAY IN LHASA FOR 18 MONTHS. I WAS FASCINATED BY THIS STORY, WHICH GAVE ME AN IDEA...



SO, WE GOT READY TO VENTURE AGAIN BUT, THIS TIME, I WAS DRESSED UP AS THE WIDOW OF A NGAGPA. THAT IS TO SAY, TANTRA PRACTITIONER, AND YONGDEN WOULD BE MY SON... BOTH OF US LOOKED LIKE ARDZOPAS, THE PILGRIMS WHO WANDER BY THE THOUSANDS THROUGH TIBET...



TO ACHIEVE THAT, I DRESSED IN RAGS, TIED A YAK TAIL TO MY HAIR AS A BRAID, BLACKENED MY HAIR WITH CHINESE INK AND COVERED MY FACE WITH A MIXTURE OF COCOA AND ASH... AT THAT POINT, I TRULY LOOKED LIKE A NATIVE TIBETAN!



TO FOOL THE TIBETANS AND NOT TO BE BETRAYED BY MY ACCENT, I SIMPLY CHANTED MANTRAS WHEN I CAME ACROSS THEM...



SOMETIMES, I WAS ASKED TO PERFORM AN EXORCISM, AND SO I DID IT... AND EVERY TIME I WAS ASKED TO HEAL, I BECAME A HEALER...



THE LONG FOUR-MONTH JOURNEY BEGAN. YONGDEN AND I LEFT WITH ONLY A BUNDLE EACH, SOME FOOD, A COMPASS, A FEW MAPS, SOME MONEY, MY INSEPARABLE REVOLVER AND, OF COURSE, SOMETHING TO LIGHT A FIRE.



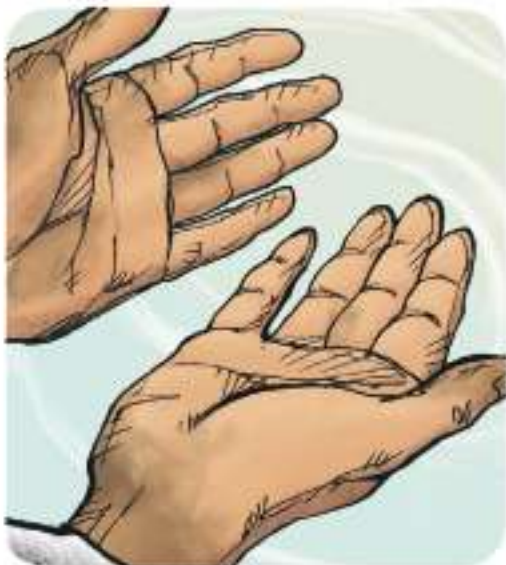
WE TRAVELED AT NIGHT TO AVOID BEING SPOTTED AND WE OFTEN SLEPT UNDER THE STARS IN THE GENTLE RAIN. BUT MANY TIMES, IN THE DARKNESS, WE TOOK THE WRONG PATH. WHAT A WASTE OF TIME! BUT DID WE HAVE THE CHOICE?



OUR PLAN WORKED QUITE WELL UNTIL I MADE A CARELESS MISTAKE: ONE DAY, WHILE CLEANING OUT OUR POT, NOT FAR FROM A VILLAGE...



I NOTICED, TERRIFIED, THAT MY HANDS HAD BECOME WHITE AGAIN IN CONTACT WITH WATER.



I QUICKLY COATED MY HANDS WITH SOME USED GREASE FROM THE BOTTOM OF THE POT TO GIVE THEM BACK THEIR BLACKISH COLOR...



AFTER THIS EPISODE, AND TO AVOID MEETING ANYONE, I CHOSE UNMAAPPED ROUTES...



* FOREIGNER.

THEN, AUTUMN WAS GIVING WAY TO WINTER. DAYS PASSED QUICKLY AND OUR SUPPLIES WERE RUNNING LOW. WE WERE OBLIGED TO BEG FOR FOOD. A FAMILY OF NOMADS ACCEPTED TO HOST US...



TO OUR GREAT AMAZEMENT, THE MAN BROUGHT US A SORT OF "BAG" FROM WHICH EMANATED A PUTRID ODOR. IT ACTUALLY WAS A STOMACH FULL OF VISCERA THAT HAD BEEN MACERATING FOR SEVERAL WEEKS!



THE MAN USES IT TO PREPARE A BROTH THAT WE COULDN'T SWALLOW! I AVOIDED IT THE BEST I COULD. YONGDEN, WHO IS SUPPOSED TO BE A BEGGAR, CANNOT REFUSE THE DONATION.



IT'D BEEN SEVERAL MONTHS SINCE OUR JOURNEY BEGAN. PASS AFTER PASS, WE MOVED FORWARD WITH DIFFICULTY... ONE DAY, A POWERFUL SNOWSTORM BLEW UP AND WE QUICKLY HAD TO FIND A SHELTER IF WE DIDN'T WANT TO FREEZE TO DEATH...



WHILE RUSHING, MY FAITHFUL COMPANION TWISTED HIS ANKLE WHICH FORCED ME TO CARRY HIM ON MY SHOULDER!



RELYING ON MY LAST OUNCE OF STRENGTH, I STRUGGLED AGAINST THE FREEZING AIR AND THE SNOW THAT SLOWED MY PROGRESS AND LITERALLY BURNED MY FEET!



IN THE SHELTER, WE BELIEVED OURSELVES TO BE SAVED, BUT A MAJOR PROBLEM AROSE: WE HAD DRIED YAK DUNGS IN OUR BAGS TO START A FIRE, BUT MY LIGHTER WAS SOAKED WITH RAIN WATER: IT WAS COMPLETELY USELESS!



YONGDEN PANICKED, BUT I REASSURED HIM BECAUSE I HAD FOUND A SOLUTION: USE THE TUMMO TECHNIQUE TO WARM MY BODY AND THEN DRY THE LIGHTER WICK...



AFTER THIS ORDEAL, I WAS EXHAUSTED, BUT WE COULD FINALLY MAKE FIRE. WE REMAINED STUCK FOR SIX DAYS WITH ONLY SOUP MADE WITH MELTED SNOW AND PIECES OF LEATHER FROM OUR BOOTS TO GIVE SOME TASTE!



ANOTHER TIME, A GROUP OF NOMAD ROBBERS TRIED TO STEAL ALL OUR MONEY... AT ONCE, MY BLOOD STARTED TO BOIL!



I KNEW PERFECTLY WELL THAT TIBETANS WERE EXTREMELY SUPERSTITIOUS. SO AS A PERFECT COMEDIAN AND STILL DRESSED UP AS A "GOMPTCHENMA", I PRETENDED TO SUMMON THE DEMONS!



LUCKILY, THE SKY STARTED TO RUMBLE. THE BRIGANDS TOOK FRIGHTS AND GAVE US BACK OUR MONEY BEFORE RUNNING AWAY!



FINALLY, AFTER FOUR MONTHS OF A
NEVER-ENDING JOURNEY, RAW-BONED
AND COMPLETELY EXHAUSTED, WE
REACHED LHASA IN FEBRUARY 1924!







Thank you for reading this book
preview. We sincerely hope you
have enjoyed it. More at:

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“The first woman to enter Lhasa, the heart of **Forbidden Tibet.**”

Orientalist, opera singer, journalist, writer, explorer, Buddhist... Alexandra David-Néel has lived a thousand lives! Now, on the threshold of her existence, the woman who was the first Westerner to enter Lhasa still has many secrets to unveil...

As she enters a long and serene agony, watched over by Marie-Madeleine, her employee and confidant, the great adventurer looks back one last time on her long and incredible existence: from her tumultuous youth to the fantastic and perilous journey to Lhasa, the Forbidden City, through her meeting with the man of her life, Alexandra David-Néel crosses the century with unfailing energy. A true hymn to adventure and non-conformism...

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GRAND ANGLE

