My Journey to Lhasa Study Guide

My Journey to Lhasa by Alexandra David-Néel

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

"My Journey to Lhasa" is the true account of Alexandra David-Neel's visit to the city of Lhasa, Tibet in 1924 at a time when foreigners are forbidden to enter. Disguised as a Tibetan pilgrim and traveling with her adopted son, a native Tibetan, she succeeds in eluding the Tibetan authorities during eight months of travel and two months living in Lhasa.

David-Neel is a student of Tibetan culture and religion and has previously spent many years in learning and observing, including a period living in western Tibet where she was the guest of the Tashi Lama, an important religious figure, until her presence was discovered and she was forced to leave the country. It is partly with a sense of revenge, she writes, that she develops the plan to cross into central Tibet to the largest city, Lhasa, located in the heart of the country.

The book begins as David-Neel and Lama Yongden enter from China into part of Tibet still under control of the Chinese after a Tibetan uprising. Here foreigners are allowed to travel, but as they cross into territory controlled by the Tibetan government, they assume the identities of religious pilgrims. David-Neel darkens her face with charcoal and cocoa and poses as Yongden's aged mother. Despite several close calls when her identity as a foreigner is nearly discovered, the pair manages to reach Lhasa after several months of dangerous travel.

Although they travel armed with revolvers and carry some modern objects such as spoons and a compass, the pair dare not reveal these item to anyone because they would ruin their disguise as poor native pilgrims. They take on the role completely, and beg for food and shelter along their way in the manner of other pilgrims.

The journey to Lhasa is treacherous. Bands of robbers roam parts of the country preying on pilgrims and other travelers. The region is mountainous and they are traveling in winter, and must hike through ice and snow. At one point they go several days without food when extreme weather and an injury to Yongden's ankle stop their progress. They travel without maps through regions that have never even been mapped, relying on the sometimes shaky advice of the native Tibetans on the best paths to lead them to Lhasa.

They stay in Lhasa for two months, arriving at the time of the New Year. David-Neel's command of the language and customs allow her to continue to pass as a native. She and Yongden then leave Lhasa, passing quickly westward to the frontier of British-controlled Bhutan. The book ends as she contacts a British representative and reveals she has just crossed Tibet through Lhasa, the first western woman ever to have done so.

Preface

Preface Summary and Analysis

The preface to My Journey to Lhasa provides the background for David-Neel's historic trek into the interior of Tibet. It is her fifth expedition in remote Asia, she writes, and comes about as a result of "certain peculiar circumstances" which she sets out to relate. (p. 1)

David-Neel opens with some brief biographical information. Since her youngest childhood in Belgium she has had a stirring drive to travel and to seek out isolated places where she can be completely alone. As a young woman she studies Oriental philosophy and comparative religion and becomes a professor at a Belgian university, and in 1910 is sent by the French Ministry of Education to Asia on a research expedition.

It is on this trip that she meets the Dalai Lama, the spiritual "king" of Tibet who is at the time in exile in Bhutan owing to "political troubles" with China. Through her persistence, she manages to meet the Dalai Lama, who has heard of her scholarship in the area of Tibetan religion. In 1912, she first enters into Tibet and is immediately enchanted by the land.

Later, she lives for a time inside Tibet, a guest of the Penchen Lama, who gives her access to religious texts. It is a time of political instability in Tibet, which has succeeded in driving out the Chinese who have held control of the country. The Tibetan government has closed the country to foreigners except by rare special permission. It is this "absurd" prohibition that stirs David-Neel's competitive spirit and she decides to flout the restriction on foreign visitors by not only sneaking into Tibet, but reaching its largest city, Lhasa, in the central part of the country.

Chapter I

Chapter I Summary and Analysis

The first chapter begins as David-Neel and Lama Yongden, her adopted son, are about to enter into independent Tibet from China. They have stayed near the border with a missionary, from whom they have concealed their intent to enter into forbidden Tibet. They have made extensive preparations to travel in disguise as Tibetan pilgrims, and chosen a route that is traveled often by such religious travelers. This road, which enters the country through the Dokar Pass, will undoubtedly lead them into more frequent contact with people than she prefers, David-Neel writes, but because it is traveled by people from all over the country who have different appearances and accents, she hopes any small flaws in her disguise may be overlooked, allowing her to pass without challenge from any officials who would immediately expel her.

David-Neel and Yongden follow the Mekong River toward the Dokar pass with two Chinese men hired to help carry their loads. Wishing to conceal from these servants their intention to enter into Tibet, David-Neel devises a ruse to get rid of them by sending them on separate errands to deliver messages to different places and then crossing the border at the Dokar Pass while they are away.

The pair poses as "arjopas," religious pilgrims who travel on foot to various religious monuments around the country. Arjopas traditionally beg for food and shelter along their pilgrimage, carrying very little with them. David-Neel and Yongden are not poor peasants like most arjopas, but in assuming their disguise, they carry only a little food and intend to beg along the way. They each carry a revolver and David-Neel has a few modern items such as spoons and a compass, but these she must keep hidden at all times for they would give her away as a foreigner.

As they approach the Dokar Pass, the travelers camp in forests and other hidden places where they will not be seen, wishing to avoid detection at all costs. They travel after dark when possible and hide during the day. They reach the pass as a blizzard passes over. Crouching in the snow, they endure the weather for an entire day before moving on.

The following morning the weather is good, David-Neel writes, and they continue walking well after the time when they would normally have taken to hiding. Rounding a bend in the path, they come across a village which they do not expect to find. It is not like a usual peasant village with farms and cottages, but is like a small city with villas, parks and palaces, all shining in a strange golden light. Afraid they might meet someone on the path so near a village, the pair hikes up into the forest to hide for the day.

Near sunset, they return to their path where they had first seen the village. It is gone, with only the rugged mountainous terrain where they had seen palaces and parks earlier in the day. David-Neel remarks to Yongden that they had simply dreamed the

village. He rushes over to a rock near the path where he had drawn a symbol that morning to protect them from demons, evidence that it had not been simply a dream. Yongden concludes that the vision was a trick by demons to delay them on their journey and that his drawing of the symbol had caused the mirage to vanish.

For a week, they have met nobody on the trail, even though it is a commonly used path. Eventually they do hear jingling bells from behind them, a sign that someone is approaching on horse. It is a small party of pilgrims, who pass them, and whom they find later along the path, stopped for a meal.

David-Neel and Yongden stop to eat with them, for not to stop would be suspicious. This is a first real test of David-Neel's disguise, and she tries to remain silent as they join the small group. This itself arouses the curiosity of the other travelers, and they ask Yongden why his mother does not speak or eat. He replies that she is the wife of a "nagspa," a kind of Tibetan magician, and is herself initiated in secret magical traditions. This raises her esteem among the travelers, who offer her some dried meat out of respect.

As they move on, the pair finds themselves in more inhabited country. They are unable to travel by night, now, as the dogs of the villagers will howl at them and give them away. They must travel by day and pass through villages. As they approach one village, they camp outside it at night, intending to start out very early so as to pass through it before it becomes active. They manage this, but later find they have taken the wrong path and so must backtrack into the village in broad daylight. David-Neel is nervous at this prospect, but they are able to pass again through the village and reach the right road without any trouble.

They camp near another village that night, and Yongden ventures into the village to purchase food. There he meets another lama who keeps a shrine, and who asks him to stay and perform funeral rites for a Tibetan man the following day. As a member of a respected sect of lamas, Yongden's services are often in demand, David-Neel explains, but he declines the request, saying that he must keep moving on. The shrine-keeper is persistent, finding the travelers the following day and asking Yongden again to help him. He again refuses. David-Neel, concerned about the extra attention they have drawn, tries to avoid the shrine-keeper but is unable to. She has a short conversation with him and he does not seem to suspect her disguise.

Chapter II

Chapter II Summary and Analysis

The pair travels through gorges and valleys and David-Neel remains alert and afraid that she may be discovered at any moment. They are now in a more thickly inhabited area and pass through several small villages, still avoiding detection by passing them very early in the morning.

They have stopped in a cave near the path to eat one day when a wealthy woman traveling by horse and with several servants stops before them. She begins to question them about where they are from. She asks them specifically if they are "philings," or foreigners. Yongden stands up to draw attention away from David-Neel and answers that they are "dokpas," a Mongolian people from the northern part of Tibet. The woman seems to be satisfied, and moves on. Later, her husband passes by, but does not even glance at them.

The episode only heightens David-Neel's concern that she will be discovered, and she begins to imagine that at any moment an official will ride up to them to expel her from the country. As they move along, she comes upon a narrow place in the path where only one person may pass at a time. She meets a well-dressed man coming from the other direction. She moves to one side, as would be expected of a peasant woman, but as the man approaches her, he removes his gun and sword as a sign of respect and salutes her as if she were a lama herself. She lays her hand on his head as a lama would do, and without a word he moves on. Yongden tells her he thinks the man saw she was a lama and so saluted her, but she begins to wonder if the man had not recognized her from a previous trip.

The pair finds a comfortable cave near a stream by a temple in which to sleep that night. The next morning, David-Neel is alarmed to discover she has lost her small compass. If it is found on path, word will spread that there is a foreigner in the area and she may be questioned. She frantically searches for it in the early morning darkness and finds it on the ground of the cave, to her great relief.

They pass through a nearby village, where Yongden asks about the path ahead. The day after passing the village, they are overtaken by a band of pilgrims who stop to ask Yongden to help a girl who is traveling with them. Her legs are hurting her, they tell him, which they suspect is the result of a demon. Yongden is a "red cap" lama, David-Neel explains, widely recognized as having the ability to tell fortunes and perform other mystic rites such as exorcism. However unbeknownst to the pilgrims, she continues, he belongs to a sect that does not recognize such superstitious beliefs. Yongden still performs the rituals, but uses them to provide practical advice. In the case of the girl with sore legs, Yongden makes a show of casting pebbles into the air and catching them and consulting the oracles, then tells the pilgrims that ahead in the road they will come across a "chorten," a kind of roadside shrine. There they should stay for three days,

each day walking around the chorten reciting prayers while the girl sits without moving. During this time she should be well-fed and her legs rubbed with hot water containing some holy sand, which he gives them. Then they can move on. But if the girl's legs continue to hurt, they must do the same thing at the next chorten they reach.

The ritual is intended to simply give the girl some rest for her aching legs, but the pilgrims faithfully believe that the ritual will remove the demon that is plaguing the girl and, thanking Yongden, they move on ahead. Later, the pair meets up with the pilgrims again. They are excited to tell the lama that the ritual has worked and that the girl's legs are feeling better.

This episode is indicative of David-Neel and Yongden's approach to Tibetan spirituality. While they do seem to accept some of the more mystical elements of the faith such as the presence of supernatural forces, they view some of these beliefs as simple superstition.

Yongden's success at "curing" the girl makes him something of a celebrity in the next village, where word has spread. He is called on to tell stories and predict fortunes, and seems to be enjoying the attention. David-Neel scolds him once they have left the village for drawing so much attention to them, and he begins to sulk. When they stop to eat the following day, they are soon joined by some nearby villagers around their small fire. The villagers wish to speak with them, but Yongden sits silently sulking, leaving David-Neel to speak with them. She is alarmed when one of them notices her pale hands and jokes that she has hands like a "philings." Finally, Yongden speaks up and tells them the pair must be leaving.

It is around this point in their journey that David-Neel finds a fur hat in the path. Tibetan superstition considers it bad luck to pick up a hat that falls to the ground while on a journey, she explains, which may be the reason it is still on the path. Ignoring the superstition, she takes it, suggesting that it has somehow been sent to her.

The chapter concludes with two tense situations involving Tibetan "ponpos," or officials. Camping one night near a village, the pair is joined the next morning by a man who talks with Yongden for a time. They learn they have been camping very near the house of the ponpos. The man leaves and they move on their way, but after a short time a messenger comes running up to them and says they must come before the ponpos. Yongden, thinking quickly, puts down his load and begins to walk back to the village with the man as if there was no question of his mother going with him. David-Neel stays with the packs, waiting nervously. After a time, Yongden returns, alone. He has answered all the ponpos questions and even received a rupee as alms.

Later they see the procession of an official approaching them far off on the narrow path. There is no way for them to avoid meeting the group, and when they do, they make way for the procession. The ponpo group stops to question them and David-Neel feels all their eyes staring at her. As Yongden answers their questions, she feels the tension growing. Suddenly she is inspired to call out in the manner of a Tibetan beggar a

request for a gift from the ponpos. This lightens the mood of the group. The ponpos hands a coin to Yongden who gratefully accepts it. The procession moves on its way.

Chapter III

Chapter III Summary and Analysis

Yongden and David-Neel proceed on their journey toward Lhasa. Their story now is that they are pilgrims from Lhasa who have traveled to the frontier region of Tibet and are now on their way home.

While eating around a small fire one morning before setting out, they are approached by a man they recognize from the procession of the ponpos who gave them alms earlier. He sits by their fire and they offer him some of the broth they have made, which he accepts willingly. He lives in the next village, he tells them, and he invites them to stay at his house that night.

Not wishing to run the risk of extra attention, the pair intends to pass through the village and camp in the wilderness that night, but just as they are about the leave the village they are spotted by the man. He insists they stay with him since they could not reach the next village by nightfall. Thinking it might be suspect if they refused, they agree.

David-Neel takes advantage of the situation by asking their host about where on the path to Lhasa other officials live. She pretends that she wants to know in order for them to beg for money from them, but in truth it is because she wants to know which villages to avoid.

Here David-Neel writes briefly about the military situation in Tibet. The villagers in the outer regions of the country are forced to join in a kind of militia and are only called into service when necessary. They are given guns inferior to those of the regular soldiers who are all from the central Lhasa area. The reason for this, David-Neel is led to understand, is because of the animosity the outer regions feel for the Lhasa government. If allowed to organize and given decent guns, it is feared the villagers will not submit to Lhasa's rule.

Every day now the pair meets with pilgrims. They are briefly stopped and interrogated by some government officials on the path, but are not detained. The episode makes them nervous, however, and David-Neel is increasingly apprehensive about being discovered.

David-Neel relates a frightening episode that takes place while they are crossing a river gorge. There is no bridge, just a leather line strung across the gorge. To cross, a person hangs from the line tied to a loop of leather. They slide down the line to the center and are then hauled up the other side by "ferrymen" by means of a tow rope. David-Neel is tied onto the rope along with a girl. They slide down to the center of the rope and are hanging there when the tow rope breaks. The girl begins to panic, convinced that the knot securing them to the line is coming loose. They hang there until one of the ferrymen climbs out onto the line and re-attaches the tow rope, hauling them in safely.

Yongden is continually stopped and asked to perform fortunetelling rituals along their way. They spend one evening in the house of a well-to-do farmer, who in exchange for his hospitality expects Yongden to bless his entire house and his farm animals. This tries Yongden's patience, but he agrees.

As they travel farther into the country, they become more confident of being taken for simple pilgrims and no longer try to hide in the forests during the day, instead staying with villagers when possible. David-Neel describes a traditional Tibetan stew some villagers prepare for them made from the organs of an animal. She finds it disgusting, but must eat a little to avoid suspicion.

The pair moves along their journey, sometimes even dropping their beggar disguise briefly to purchase supplies. David-Neel is increasingly confident, but is also aware that her journey may be cut short at any moment.

Chapter IV

Chapter IV Summary and Analysis

David-Neel and Yongden approach the part of Tibet known as Po. There are two roads they have been told about across the region. One is a well-traveled valley road that passes through several villages. It is generally safe, although there may be small bands of thieves along the way. The other road is not on any map. It runs through two mountain passes with a low area in between them. It is unlikely the travelers would meet anyone on this path, but there is the possibility of running into more dangerous bands of raiders who might kill them to protect their hiding places. There will not be any place to get food, so plenty must be carried. There is also the danger that the passes might be blocked by snow while the travelers are between them, trapping them. Nevertheless, David-Neel chooses to head toward the mountain road in part because it is not on any maps and has never been charted.

The pair stop in a village called Tashi Tse. Here David-Neel describes the political situation for the people of the region. The farmland is poor and they are heavily taxed to support the local official. They are forbidden from leaving the area to look for better farmland. Anyone who does manage to leave is gone after and brought back.

They make their way higher up toward the mountain path. They run short of water, the only source being a river that is far below them. They begin to look for a place to camp and see a patch of something yellow on the other side of the river. They climb down and up the other side of the river gorge to investigate and find it is a pile of hay placed high on a scaffold to keep it from animals. Near the hay is a campsite with some covered pens, a hearth, and plenty of dried cow dung, which is used for fuel.

The next day they continue onward and upward toward what they think is the top of the mountain pass. When they reach this point, however, they are stunned to see a huge expanse of snow ahead of them with no indication of where the path leads. They choose to go straight ahead, with David-Neel taking the lead. She is determined to find the pass, and finally sees the snow-covered form of a "latza," a kind of marker placed at summits and passes to mark the path. Here she stops and calls out to Yongden, who is far behind her. They once again find a trace of the path and begin to descend. It is dark now, but their spirits are high for having dodged a dangerous situation.

They walk until 2 a.m. until they find a flat place near a river to camp. Yongden starts looking for fuel to build a fire, however his fire-starting kit of flint, steel and tinder has become wet and does not work. David-Neel writes that she is able to practice the art of "thumo reskiang," which she has learned from Tibetan hermits. This art involves going into a kind of trance to increase the body's internal heat. Yongden tells her to use this practice to keep herself warm while he hunts for fuel. David-Neel takes his wet fire-starting equipment and places it next to her skin, then begins to increase her body heat, which dries out the equipment. She is able to start a fire to keep them from freezing.

As they move along the mountain path, they come across a few small camps and villages where they beg shelter. They learn from some villagers about the next passes they will encounter leading into the land of Po. One of them is probably closed, they are told, but the other two may be open. They are given a place to sleep in the house of a well-off farm family and the chapter ends as they are all drifting off to sleep.

Chapter V

Chapter V Summary and Analysis

David-Neel and Yongden wake early the next day to continue on their journey. They have convinced a "dokpa," one of the shepherd farmer peasants, to guide them to the pass leading into the Po country. They have told him that his guiding the lama Yongden and his mother will bring him rewards in future lives, but when he leaves after guiding them to the pass with his horse, they also pay him a small amount of money. Yongden also impresses on him that he and David-Neel have the protection of the king of the Po region. This is meant to prevent him from following them. The guide refuses the money and hurries back to his home.

They do not feel optimistic at the crossing of the pass. Yongden is concerned that it will snow and about their dwindling food supply. They walk the rest of the day. It begins to snow around sunset.

They pitch their simple tent, using their walking staffs as tent poles. Soon the snow on the tent fabric begins to strain the staffs. They cannot risk breaking them, so they construct a kind of lean-to with the cloth against a rock. They go to sleep, but David-Neel awakens in the night with the feeling that something is wrong. The snow has piled up on the cloth and it is sagging severely. They have nearly been buried alive in the snow. They crouch and stand up together to throw off the snow. With no other way to keep warm, they continue walking. They walk until noon the next day, when they find an earthen cave where they can be reasonably comfortable and warm. They have only a little "tsampa" left for food, a dried grain which is a common food in Tibet. Here they sleep the rest of the day and the night.

The following day, they each explore around the cave, looking for a place to scout out the route ahead. As David-Neel is returning to the cave, she hears a cry from Yongden. He has fallen into a ravine and injured his ankle. He is unable to walk. With difficulty, she helps him back to the cave and examines his ankle. It is sprained, but not broken.

Still, they are in a difficult situation. She is not strong enough to carry him. He cannot walk, and they have very little food. They do not know how far the next village might be. David-Neel suggests that she leave Yongden with the small amount of food and go for help. He counters that he does not think any of the "Popas" as the people of Po are called, would return with her simply to help a beggar, which is what they appear to be.

The following day, David-Neel decides she will head down the valley looking for anyone who might help and return to the cave by nightfall. She finds nobody, but does find some abandoned encampments where she is able to gather some fuel for a fire. She returns to the cave where Yongden is waiting. They build a fire and go to sleep.

The next day, Yongden is able to stand. With David-Neel carrying both their packs, and with her help, they are able to make their way down from the cave into the forest, where David-Neel cuts a branch into a kind of crutch for Yongden. They are moving slowly, but the weather clears and the path is well marked through the forest.

At night, the snow begins to fall again, however, and the path becomes obscured. They slog through the snow when suddenly David-Neel strikes her feet on something. It is a fence. She follows it and soon finds a small empty house with a shed. She calls out to Yongden behind her, and they stay that night inside the relatively comfortable house. They eat the last of their tsampa.

The next Yongden is still unable to walk without his crutch. David-Neel is also in bad shape. Her felt boots have started to come apart and her toes have become partially frozen and blistered. Yongden repairs her boots as best he can. It continues to snow, and although they have now run out of food and tea, they decide to rest in the house another day and set out early the next morning. Yongden goes out briefly to test his ankle and to find the road they will take the next day.

They wake early and set out on the path Yongden has identified. They move slowly, as they both are in considerable pain. They walk until midday when they discover they have been traveling in the wrong direction. They have no choice but to return to the encampment. The situation is serious, David-Neel writes. They have already gone three days without any real food and have no idea how far the next village might be. After reaching the dokpas' hut again, Yongden goes out again to find the right path. This time he returns certain that he has found it. David-Neel consults her calendar and discovers that it is Christmas Eve.

That night, she wakes imagining she hears bells in the distance. Yongden sleeps in feverish fits, calling out in his sleep that the snow is piling up and they must leave right away. The next morning they boil some snow, hot water being their only nourishment. David-Neel half-heartedly wishes that some mountain god will provide them with even just a little piece of butter or fat. Yongden suggests that she might do what a "true Tibetan" would do in their case. (p. 174) He pulls out a small piece of bacon that he has used to rub on their boots to provide waterproofing, and a few pieces of raw skin left over from his repair of her boots. They boil the bits in water to make a soup. This is their Christmas feast, David-Neel jokes.

They continue on. The path becomes clearer and the snow less deep. They come across a small hut and David-Neel is astonished to see a man standing outside it. They ask if they might come inside to build a fire, and he allows them in. They are further surprised to find a dozen men inside, all seated around a fire. They have just finished eating, they said, and have no more food, but offer the travelers some buttered tea. The men are impressed that the two have descended from the snowy pass and give them a prized place to sit near the fire. They ask Yongden to tell fortunes.

They set out the next day refreshed, and soon reach a village where they are able to beg a meal and a place to stay. They have heard fantastic stories about the Popas all

being robbers and possibly cannibals, but David-Neel writes that their initial impressions are of a friendly, hospitable people. This impression changes as they pass through another village, however, where everyone runs into their houses as they pass, shutting their doors and windows and ignoring them. On the edge of the village they come across a larger house, the home of a wealthy farmer. Here they are allowed in to eat and sleep.

Chapter VI

Chapter VI Summary and Analysis

David-Neel and Yongden continue their trek through the land of the Po, begging food and shelter where they can and sometimes buying supplies. In general, they find the Popas helpful people, and David-Neel is confident that her disguise will not be questioned, for she is well into Tibet and nobody would suspect a foreigner of having come so far.

The pair has a run-in with some potential thieves while eating breakfast one day. As they sit by their fire, a man approaches and joins them. Their packs are open, and the man spies the two common spoons that David-Neel carries. He asks them if they have anything to sell, a common question to travelers. The man begins to eat some cheese that he has with him, and Yongden says he would consider trading for some of it, if he has any more. The man says he would trade some cheese for needles if they have any. They do have some needles to trade, Yongden tells him, and the man leaves to get some cheese.

He returns with another man, and they immediately begin to bargain for the tent and spoons. One of the men keeps looking back toward the path as if he is expecting someone, and David-Neel realizes they have called for others to come and help rob them. The men take the spoons and tent and begin to rummage through the other things. David-Neel stands and cries in a firm voice for them to put everything back. She pulls out the revolver she keeps hidden and fires it. The men throw the things they are holding on the ground and rush off.

Afraid the men may return with support, David-Neel and Yongden quickly pack up and leave. They are fortunate to find a large group of pilgrims on the road, with which they are able to travel safely. This group had been attacked by robbers earlier in their journey, they learn.

The pair has another narrow escape when a group of armed men stop Yongden on the path ahead of David-Neel. They take two rupees from him and begin to open his pack. She must think quickly. Firing her gun will not scare them, for they are armed as well and will turn their guns on them. Instead, she begins to cry out dramatically that they have taken their only money and calling upon various terrible Tibetan deities to curse the men who would take the last two rupees of a lama. Yongden tells the men that David-Neel is a "nagspa" and out of fear they return her the money and beg her not to curse them anymore. Here David-Neel relates a story from her previous time in Tibet when she used her supposed magic abilities to thwart a band of robbers.

The pair manages to avoid any more robbers, but David-Neel gets a scare of a different kind when they have stopped to camp for the night and a strange lama comes up to their fire seemingly out of nowhere. He crouches near them and remains silent for a

long time. Finally, he turns to David-Neel and addresses her as "Jetsunma," her title as a lama, and asks her a question about her previous time living in Tibet. He apparently knows her and has recognized her, although she cannot remember his face. She remains calm, and the pair talks late into the night. She grows confident that the lama will not report her to anyone, but she remains vigilant.

The pair reaches the village of Temo, where they are able to replenish their provisions and Yongden replaces his ragged clothing. Here David-Neel learns that her friend, the Panchen Lama, has been forced out of his palace and is living in exile. She does not know the details, but describes briefly the persecution of many of the religious leaders of Lhasa by the Tibetan government over their sympathy for the Chinese.

David-Neel and Yongden continue to trek along the Brahmaputra River, getting ever nearer their goal. They know they must cross a toll bridge over the river and then receive permission from an official to proceed beyond it. They have discussed the best way to do this many times, and David-Neel has worried about it repeatedly. In the end, however, it is as simple as her sitting down outside the official's house while Yongden goes inside and gets permission for both of them to go on. They are now on one of the major roads of Tibet, about to enter Lhasa, the ultimate goal of their journey.

Chapter VII

Chapter VII Summary and Analysis

Only a few miles from Lhasa, now, David-Neel and Yongden can see the Potala, the palace of the Dalai Lama built high on a hill in Lhasa. David-Neel feels triumphant, but Yongden is more cautious since they have not yet actually reached the city and may run across more officials before they do.

They have no trouble, however, and enter Lhasa. It is at the time of the New Year celebrations, and many pilgrims have come to the city to celebrate them. Fortune smiles again on David-Neel and she is almost immediately offered a place to stay near the city, avoiding the necessity of having to beg for shelter.

David-Neel describes the Potala. It is an enormous palace of red and white, built on one of two hills within Lhasa. While grand in size, it is somewhat crude and plain in appearance, she writes. It is full of beautifully decorated rooms, mostly the work of Chinese artists. It contains temples and apartments and is the traditional palace of the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibet. Unsure of how long she may have in Lhasa if she is discovered, David-Neel decides to make the Potala the first place she visits.

She and Yongden go to the Potala, but do not want to enter it by themselves, fearing they may draw too much attention. They linger outside the palace waiting for a group of pilgrims to come to the palace, with which they might blend in. No pilgrims come by, but a pair of traders does walk past and Yongden manages to convince them that they should visit the Potala and that he will be their guide. They reluctantly agree, and the three men climb the high stairway to the palace with David-Neel following respectfully behind.

David-Neel is given a scare as she enters the palace. She is wearing the fur bonnet she picked up from the road earlier, but hats cannot be worn inside the Potala. A young monk scolds her and insists that she remove it. The hat is crucial to her disguise, however, as it covers her brown hair. She reluctantly removes it, but does not seem to draw too much attention except from Yongden, who can hardly keep from laughing at her appearance. Part of her hair is still darkened with black ink, and she has false black braids made from yak hair. She overhears some others talking about her, assuming that she is a "Ladki," a person from Ladak in western Tibet, where the people have a lighter coloring. The Dalai Lama only comes to the Potala during certain ceremonies, David-Neel writes, living most of his time in a lamasery nearby. These lamaseries, of which there are several, are like feudal manors, supported by the agriculture and commerce of the people living around them, and inhabited by lamas.

The second most important place David-Neel wishes to see is the temple of Jo Khang. Here she joins a stream of pilgrims who enter to view a statue of the Buddha that is

supposed to have come from India, and to drink of the holy water there. She is again taken for a Ladki by the other pilgrims.

David-Neel writes that in al her time spent in Tibet, it is during the two months she spends in Lhasa that she feels she has come closest to its people. As she moves about the city, visiting its markets and the New Year festivals, she is delighted to be taken as a native, even when her disguise is good enough for a policeman to strike her when she tries to enter an area off limits to peasants.

David-Neel relates several stories about the well-to-do people with whom she stays. They live in a three-room house and let two of the rooms out to boarders. The house is small and crowded, and David-Neel becomes embroiled in several family issues. One night their host, a drunkard, begins to beat his wife. David-Neel brings her into her room to protect her from the man. Meanwhile, the wife of one of the other boarders, a former soldier David-Neel calls "The Captain," also tries to come to the woman's aid and is struck in the face by the host. When the Captain returns to the house and finds his wife injured, he declares his intention to sue the host and tells David-Neel she will be called to testify in the matter. She also learns that the host's wife intends to divorce him and that she will be called to testify in that case, too. Wishing to avoid having to appear before any officials, she and Yongden arrange to leave Lhasa for a week's travel in the countryside. When they return, however, the cases have not yet gone to trial, the judge postponing them until after the New Year's ceremonies.

David-Neel describes the ceremony of scapegoat that takes place each year in Lhasa. A man volunteers to be the scapegoat and he is given a black yak tail as a symbol. In the days before the ceremony, he moves around the city collecting offerings of money from everyone he can. Those reluctant to give he threatens by raising the yak tail, which is believed to give him the power of cursing anyone who does not give freely. On the day of the ceremony, the man is dressed up in goat fur and brought before the Dalai Lama, who charges him with all the sins of the city. He is then run out of town to the shouts and whistles of the inhabitants.

One of the last ceremonies David-Neel describes before leaving Lhasa is called the "Serpang." It is a grand procession at the foot of the Potala, with drummers, large silk banners, and marching elephants. She closes the chapter with a description of the fantastic scene taking place under the golden light of Tibet.

Chapter VIII

Chapter VIII Summary and Analysis

The final chapter of "My Journey to Lhasa" is very brief. Yongden and David-Neel leave the city heading toward the British-controlled region of Bhutan, to the southeast of Lhasa. Now that she is moving toward the border, she no longer assumes the disguise of a beggar, but that of a middle-class woman. They hire a servant and horses to carry their loads, including several books that David-Neel has obtained in Lhasa. She hunts for more books on their way to Gyantze, the town on the southern border of Tibet which is their destination.

They reach Gyantze where there is a British fort. The inhabitants are astonished at what they take to be a Tibetan woman speaking in English, and are no less astonished when she explains where she has been. David-Neel closes the book as she drifts off to sleep in the British fort, triumphant in her victory as the first western woman to cross Tibet and visit Lhasa.

Characters

Alexandra David-Neel

The author and narrator of "My Journey to Lhasa," Alexandra David-Neel is in her 50s as she sets out on her journey. It is her fifth time traveling into Tibet. She has studied Tibetan religion and culture, and is ordained as a Tibetan lama.

She does not travel as a lama, however, as the political situation in Tibet forbids foreign travelers. She draws upon her extensive experience living among Tibetans to successfully disguise herself as a native. She and her adopted son, Lama Yongden, travel to Lhasa pretending to be poor peasant beggars on a religious pilgrimage. She displays a deep resourcefulness in avoiding the suspicion of the people she meets in Tibet and in elaborating convincing stories that explain their purpose for being on the road. She is very bold when the situation calls for it, sometimes to the point of recklessness.

David-Neel admits in the preface to the book that she undertakes the journey to Lhasa as a kind of revenge for having been expelled from Tibet on an earlier visit. She displays her pride on completing her journey as the first western woman to ever travel to Lhasa, expressing her pleasure at confounding the Tibetan officials with her disguise that allows her to live under their noses in the capital city for two months.

David-Neel is a strong-willed person whose assumed role as the mother of Yongden requires her to act submissive to him. In private, however, it is clear from her writing that she is in charge of their affairs. The two have developed code phrases that allow her to give him instructions when others are present.

David-Neel is an amateur geographer and anthropologist, and does her best to remember and describe the landscapes and peoples she encounters on her trip. She is also a religious scholar, and uses her time in Lhasa to accumulate books and other texts for her academic use.

Lama Yongden

Lama Yongden is the adopted son of the author, Alexandra David-Neel, who accompanies her on her trek to Lhasa. He is an ordained lama of a "red cap" sect, a type of Buddhist clergyman believed to have supernatural abilities to heal, tell fortunes, exorcise demons and see into the future as well as other magical skills. David-Neel explains that Yongden himself does not fully believe in the more superstitious elements of Tibetan beliefs, but he plays the part of the fortuneteller in order to placate the native Tibetans they meet along the way. His "fortunes" however are often just educated guesses tempered with practical advice given in a mystical form.

Yongden is a crucial part of David-Neel's disguise, as he is a native Tibetan able to travel freely. As his mother, David-Neel is able to assume a submissive role and allow him to negotiate with officials and draw attention away from her. He is a quick thinker, and gets the pair out of more than one tight spot when David-Neel's disguise is in jeopardy.

The Penchen Lama

The Penchen Lama, also called the Tashi Lama or the Penchen Tashi Lama, is the second most revered religious figure in Tibet after the Dalai Lama. David-Neel writes that the Penchen Lama is an educated man who encourages learning. She became personally acquainted with him on an earlier visit to Tibet when he offered her access to religious texts. At the time described in "My Journey to Lhasa," the Penchen Lama has been exiled from central Tibet, possibly because of his sympathy for the former Chinese government.

The Dalai Lama

The spiritual leader of Tibet whose traditional palace, the Potala, is a central fixture of the capital city of Lhasa. The Dalai Lama does not himself live much in the Potala, David-Neel writes, spending most of his time at an estate outside Lhasa. David-Neel indicates that she has met the Dalai Lama before while he was living outside Tibet. She views him once again in Lhasa, from the crowd during a new-year ceremony.

Arjopas

Pilgrims who wander through Tibet from one religious location to another, usually begging for food and shelter along the way. David-Neel and Yongden pose as Arjopas during most of their journey.

The Popas

The people of the Po region of Tibet, among whom David-Neel and Yongden stay during much of their journey. They are warned about the Popas by other Tibetans, who claim they are cannibals and robbers. While they do run into some thieves during their travel through Po, for the most part they find the Popas hospitable people.

Dokpas

Tibetan shepherds who drive their livestock into the mountain pastures during the warm months. Dokpas construct summer living quarters away from the villages where they stay near their herds. David-Neel and Yongden occasionally use empty huts built by dokpas as shelter.

Ponpos

Village chiefs who are in the service of the Lhasa government. David-Neel and Yongden do everything possible to avoid ponpos lest they be asked too many questions and reveal their true identities.

Red Cap Lamas

Members of mystical Tibetan Buddhist sects known for their practice of ritual fortune-telling and healing. David-Neel calls them "Red Caps" owing to the color of their headgear. They are distinguished from the less mystical sects that wear yellow hats. Yongden is a "Red Cap" lama.

Yellow Cap lamas

Members of Tibetan Buddhist sects that wear yellow hats. They are distinguished from the more mystical sects that wear red hats.

Philings

The TIbetan word used to describe western foreigners. Philings are spoken of with a mix of wonder and fear, most Tibetans never having met anyone from outside Asia. They are forbidden to travel in Tibet, requiring David-Neel to travel incognito.

The Ladki

A generally fair-skinned and light-haired people from the north of Tibet. David-Neel is sometimes taken to be a Ladki owing to her lighter coloring than most native Tibetans.

Gompchen

Religious hermits who live in isolation in meditative contemplation. David-Neel writes that she herself lived previously as a gomchen for a time.

Objects/Places

Tibet

The Asian country bordered by China, India and Nepal through which David-Neel travels. At the time of this book, Tibet has recently gained its independence from China.

Lhasa

The capital city of Tibet and the ultimate goal of David-Neel's journey. It is a busy city, and the home of the independent Tibetan government. Lhasa is also the spiritual capital of the country, and is the location of the Potala, the palace of the Dalai Lama

The Potala

The traditional palace of the Dalai Lama built on a high hill in Lhasa. The Potala contains many apartments and temples within it, and is largely open to visitors.

China

The former ruling country of Tibet and its largest neighboring country. China still holds influence in the outer regions of Tibet at the time of David-Neel's visit, and she describes many Tibetans as preferring their lives under the Chinese to that under the Lhasa government. David-Neel and Yongden enter Tibet from China.

India

One of the countries bordering Tibet, India is a large influence on the religion of Tibet, being the source of Buddhism.

Bhutan

A British-controlled region on the southern border of Tibet. David-Neel and Yongden leave Tibet at the frontier with Bhutan.

Kha Karpo

A mountain in eastern Tibet that is sacred to Tibetans and the object of pilgrimages. The Kha Karpo is near where David-Neel enters Tibet, and she pretends to be a pilgrim on her way back from there to Lhasa during much of her journey.

Dokar Pass

The mountain pass through which David-Neel and Yongden enter Tibet

Gompa

A Tibetan monastery.

Tsampa

Roasted barley or wheat flour. Tsampa is a staple food of Tibet.

Mos

A ritual of fortune-telling that Yongden engages in as a lama. He is often called on to perform mos by Tibetans they meet.

Nagspa

A Tibetan lama especially associated with dark magic. Yongden's father was a nagspa, and as she is posing as his mother, David-Neel sometimes claims to be the wife of a nagspa in order to command a measure of fear and respect from Tibetans.

Themes

Mysticism

David-Neel is a practical person who regularly dismisses what she believes are merely superstitious beliefs among native Tibetans. Despite her dismissals, however, she occasionally presents episodes in her journey with the implication that they have mystical origins.

As David-Neel and Yongden are first crossing into Tibetan territory, they come across a grand monastery with golden roofs. Wanting to avoid attention, they choose a place to camp some distance from the monastery. The following day, however, the palatial building is gone. Later, David Neel sees the Potala, the grand palace of the Dalai Lama in Lhasa and realizes the vision she shared with Yongden was of Lhasa itself.

Elsewhere, she again suggests her journey takes place under a kind of divine protection. She describes the Tibetan superstition of never picking up a hat that falls on the path while on a journey. When she herself finds a fur bonnet along their path, she ignores the superstition and picks it up. Later she finds it very useful in hiding her fair-colored hair, enhancing her disguise and making her look more like a native. She suggests the bonnet was somehow "sent" to her for this purpose.

It is often difficult to tell where David-Neel draws the line between superstition and what she feels is truly mystic phenomenon. She finds great "fun" in the pretend fortunes that Yongden concocts for the natives who ask him to look into the future for them, and even takes pride in duping some Tibetans into giving her an ornate dagger they believe has been cursed. Yet at the same time, she seems to take her own spirituality very seriously, indicating that she has spent long periods in isolation and study of Tibetan Buddhism, and does not seem to reject the sometimes mystical explanations that Yongden occasionally offers for their good fortune.

The Political Situation in Tibet

In the Preface to "My Journey to Lhasa," David-Neel writes, "As for myself, I profoundly despise everything which is connected with politics, and carefully avoid mixing in such matters." This definitive pronouncement does not seem to preclude David-Neel from offering her opinion on the political situation of Tibet, however, and depicting the sometimes violent conditions its people live under.

At the time of David-Neel's journey, independent Tibet is under the control of a Tibetan government based at Lhasa. The country has recently gained its independence from China, and, apparently to avoid any outside influence, has prohibited foreigners from entering or traveling through the country, a restriction that David-Neel calls "absurd."

Lhasa's influence diminishes the farther one gets from central Tibet, David-Neel explains, where the rural villagers are more likely to be sympathetic to their former Chinese rulers who did not tax them so heavily or force them into labor for the benefit of the state. These villagers are watched over by a series of officials, called ponpos, who maintain a sometimes violent order over them. David-Neel describes the downtrodden region around the village Tashi Tse, for example, where the farmland is poor but the people are forbidden from moving out of the region to try to improve their lot. Anyone who does escape is sought after and returned, receiving a punishment of beatings and fines. It is no wonder, David-Neel suggests, that these people long for the more relaxed rule of the former Chinese government.

While David-Neel displays her sympathy for the Tibetan people, she also demonstrates an attitude of being above politics. She describes where political policies clash with the real lives being lived by Tibet's people, but does not attempt to prescribe any political solutions to these problems. When she herself is beaten as a peasant by a policeman while living in Lhasa, she does not stop to ask whether it is fair or just. Instead, she is delighted that she has assimilated herself so perfectly as to fool the policeman into thinking she truly is a poor Tibetan.

The People and Culture of Tibet

Throughout "My Journey to Lhasa" David-Neel provides vivid descriptions of her interactions with the native peoples of Tibet. While her disguise is not entirely perfect, she is able to live among them and be taken for one of their own and thus observe them closely. A major theme of the book is interpreting and describing Tibet and its people to a western, English-speaking audience that is not acquainted with Asia and has never visited Tibet.

Tibetans, as David-Neel describes them, are for the most part friendly and hospitable to strangers, believing that their actions in this life will affect their lot in future lives when they are reincarnated. They are a superstitious people in her estimation, a trait she sometime mocks gently or uses to her advantage to escape trouble. They have no regard for exactness in giving directions and are often not familiar with the surrounding country outside of their own. They live for the most part in small villages surrounded by agricultural fields and keep sheep, yaks, goats and cattle, which are herded into grasslands during the warm months.

The Tibetans are consistently curious about travelers, and David-Neel and Yongden are often asked where they are from and asked to describe the places they have seen. Except for some lamas who may live among the villages as shrine-keepers and the government officials that collect local taxes and enforce the rule of the Lhasa government, the villagers are illiterate.

The main food staples are tsampa, butter and tea. Tsampa is a roasted flour of barley or wheat. Dried meat is also eaten when available. David-Neel describes one stew she

finds revolting that is made with the internal organs of animals. Molasses cakes are a special treat.

The homes are usually small, with just one or two rooms and many people sharing the home. Farm houses are usually constructed with quarters for the animals below and people living above them.

David-Neel is a keen observer, and generally interprets Tibetan culture from the probable point of view of her western readership. She herself has adopted many Tibetan customs in her travels, and is able to adapt easily to what seem like hardships to her readers who are accustomed to more comfortable living standards. She does not judge whether the Tibetans ought to aspire to raise their standard of living, but seems to accept them as part of the wonder of the Tibetan region.

Style

Perspective

"My Journey to Lhasa" is a first-person account of David-Neel's secret journey into the interior of Tibet, told from her own personal experience. Her primary perspective is as an educated western explorer describing a largely unknown Asian culture and geographical region to a western readership.

David-Neel has a profound respect for Tibet and its people and has devoted much of her life in studying Tibetan culture and observing Tibetan Buddhism. Required to live among the Tibetans and pass for one of them during her journey, David-Neel is able to observe the culture very closely and describe it vividly for western readers.

David-Neel intentionally avoids bringing a political perspective to her narrative, claiming she wants nothing to do with politics. She cannot avoid the subject completely, however, since it is the political situation that requires her to hide from the Tibetan government officials. She also does not hesitate to mention where the government's actions result in unfair treatment.

As an observer of Buddhism, David-Neel brings the perspective of a fellow follower to her description of the various rituals and observances of the Tibetans. But she is also a practical person who does not share in what she considers simply superstitious beliefs. She finds these beliefs amusing at times, and sometimes uses them to her advantage to escape trouble, but she is generally respectful of the beliefs of the Tibetan people.

Tone

David-Neel employs a straightforward descriptive tone throughout most of her narrative. Recognizing that her readers are likely to be completely unfamiliar with her subject, she provides ample details that paint a picture of her sometimes treacherous journey.

David-Neel's writing reveals a woman who is fiercely independent and proud. In the preface of the book, she admits that one of her primary reasons for wanting to visit Lhasa is as a sort of revenge for having been removed from Tibet earlier as a foreigner. Traveling incognito, the possibility of discovery hovers over the entire narrative, giving it an air of danger. The very real physical challenges faced by David-Neel and Yongden add another thrilling adventure element to the story.

David-Neel injects humor into her story at several points, mostly centered on the somewhat absurd situations she finds herself in as an affluent, educated westerner forced to take on the identity of a poor, ignorant peasant. She is generally respectful of the Tibetans and her love for their culture and the country is evident, but her tone is sometimes condescending toward the people she finds ignorant or under superstitious misapprehensions.

David-Neel seems to enjoy the ruse of assuming the identity of a native Tibetan and is very pleased with herself when her disguise is put to the test and she passes. At the same time, her joyful tone is tempered with some frustration that she cannot live there freely as she wishes to do.

Structure

"My Journey to Lhasa" is divided into nine sections, a preface and eight chapters. The preface provides background information by David-Neel briefly explaining her previous experience traveling and living in Tibet, her extensive knowledge of Tibet's culture and language, and her reasons for undertaking the present journey.

The eight untitled chapters that follow present the journey in chronological order, beginning with David-Neel and Yongden's entry into the frontier of Tibetan-controlled Tibet from Chinese-controlled Tibet in the east, the overland hike to Lhasa in central Tibet disguised as pilgrims, the two-month stay in Lhasa, and the trek out of Tibet disguised as a well-to-do Tibetan woman.

The narrative is presented in the first person, in the form of a personal travelogue. David-Neel sometimes makes reference to the final outcome of her journey, but for the most part the action unfolds as it is being described with the reader uncertain what will happen next.

David-Neel restrains her narrative mostly to a description of her travels and refrains from entering into longer discussions about Tibetan culture and religion except where necessary. She frequently mentions that she intends to delve more completely into these subjects in other books, structuring "My Journey to Lhasa" as mainly a descriptive and entertaining account of her own experience traveling through an unfamiliar landscape in dangerous circumstances rather than a more extensive examination of Tibetan culture.

Quotes

"Ever since I was five years old, a tiny precocious child of Paris, I wished to move out of the narrow limits in which, like all children of my age, I was then kept. I craved to go beyond the garden gate, to follow the road that passed it by, and to set out for the Unknown." Preface, p. xxxi

"What decided me to go to Lhasa was, above all, the absurd prohibition which closes Thibet." Preface, p. xxxiv

"What would be the end of this new attempt? I was full of hope. A previous experience had proved to me that in the disguise of a poor traveler I could escape notice." Chapter I, p. 2

"The Dokar Pass now stood before us, most impressive against a gray evening sky. It is a depression in a gigantic barren range whose Cyclopean slopes sag like cables outstretched across rivers to serve as bridges. The knowledge that it marks the threshold of th guarded region added to the sternness of its aspect." Chapter I, p. 25

"The jungle had ceased to be charming. I again began to see a spy behind every bush, and the water of the Salween muttered threatening or mocking words." Chapter II, p. 45

"A villager was running after us across the fields. 'You must come before the ponpo,' he said. These were the very same words with which I had been stopped in Kham, after my hard journey through the snows, and the crossing of the 'Iron Bridge.'" Chapter II, p. 66

"I had seldom a more sumptuous bedroom than that natural and immense hall whose tall pillars supported a roof of thick foliage. It reminded me of the temple-like glade where I had halted one night while rounding the Kha Karpo. But this place was much larger and less gloomy." Chapter II, p. 75

"To leave the country, to look for better land or less exacting lords, is not permitted. A few ventured the flight and established themselves in neighboring provinces. Having been discovered, they were taken away from the new home they had created and led back to Tashi Tse, where they were beaten and heavily fined." Chapter III, p. 123

"How could I express what we felt at that moment? It was a mixture of admiration and grief. We were at the same time wonder-stricken and terrified. Quite suddenly an awe-inspiring landscape, which had been previously shut from our sight by the walls of the valley, burst upon us." Chapter III, p. 130

"Dry wood was scarce. To cut and collect some while the snow fell kept us busy for a long time. Nevertheless we gathered enough small branches to boil the tea." Chapter V, p. 161

"Then he moved to get up, uttered a moan, whilst he became pale, shut his eyes, and whispered: 'Oh! my foot!' He tried a second time to stand, but without success. 'I cannot,' he said, the pain bringing tears to his eyes. 'I cannot stand.' I felt terrified." Chapter V, p. 163

"Although Sung Zong is one of the most important places of the Po country, and is of considerable geographical interest, being at the junction of two large rivers, it has not yet been charted on the maps." Chapter VI, p. 194

"At last, after four months of tramping, filled with adventures and observations of which I have been able to relate but very small part, I left Dechen one morning at dawn, and set out upon the last stage to Lhasa." Chapter VII, p. 261

"The capital of Thibet is a town full of anmation, inhabited by jolly people whose greatest pleasure is to loiter and chat out-of-doors." Chapter VII, p. 279

"I left Lhasa as quietly as I had entered, and no one suspected that a foreign woman had lived there for two months. " Chapter VIII, p. 305

"I reached Gyantze at dusk and went straight to the bungalow. The first gentleman who saw me and heard a Thibetan woman addressing him in English was dumfounded." Chapter VIII, p. 317

Topics for Discussion

How does David-Neel treat religion and the religious culture of the people she meets in Tibet?

David-Neel writes in the preface that she avoids anything to do with politics. Is this attitude born out in the rest of the book?

What is David-Neel's opinion of Tibet's political situation?

David-Neel assumes several different disguises during her journey. Why is this?

Discuss the relationship between David-Neel and Yongden. What are their roles? How do they rely on one another?

What draws David-Neel so strongly to the land of Tibet?

What is David-Neels purpose for traveling to Lhasa?