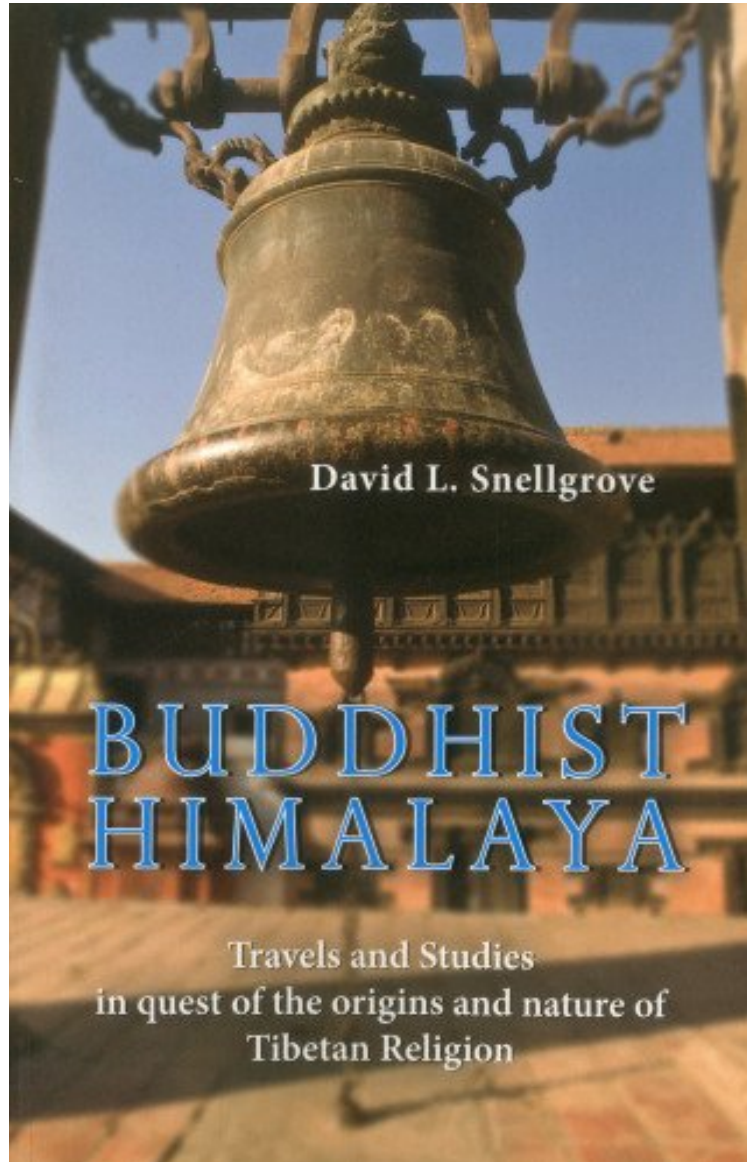


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Buddhist Himalaya: Travels and Studies in quest of the origins and nature of Tibetan Religion

David Snellgrove

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David Snellgrove : Buddhist Himalaya: Travels and Studies in quest of the origins and nature of Tibetan Religion before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Buddhist Himalaya: Travels and Studies in quest of the origins and nature of Tibetan Religion:

2 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Reflections on Vajrayana cultureBy inner exileinspired by the author's travels in India and Nepal in 1953-4. This book appears to be a new version of the second edition (Kathmandu: Himalayan Book Sellers 1995) the following review is based on, occasional page numbers being given accordingly. As for the academic credentials of David L. Snellgrove (b. 1920), he's been affiliated with the School of Oriental and African Studies (London) as Professor Emeritus, holds a doctorate in literature from the University of Cambridge, and is a Fellow of the British Academy. Being an early publication (1st edition - London: Bruno Cassirer 1957) in his career, he readily admits in the preface to the 2nd edition (p. xi) that "[i]n retrospect it has seemed to me a rather amateurish work, or at least the work of a new-comer giving his first impressions of a vast and complex subject." For a lot more refined synthesis, the reader is kindly referred to Snellgrove's "Indo-Tibetan Buddhism" (1987) that originally came out in two volumes, yet somewhat later appeared in a single tome. As can be expected, aside from outdated terminology of course, there tend to be some rash conclusions (a) and factually incorrect data (b): a) "It is not an exaggeration to characterize Buddhism as essentially anti-social" (p. 108) - tell this to a Mahayana on the bodhisattva path; b) "From him [mahasiddha Dombhi Heruka] he [Drogmi Lotsava, 992/3-1072/77] received initiation into the practice known as 'Way and Effect' (lam-'bras) ['Path and Fruit'] which employed sexual means for the mystical reintegrating of human personality" (p. 199). As far as I'm aware the system of 'Path and Fruit' - based on the Hevajra Tantra - involves no debauchery whatsoever, as it is one of the major gdams-ngag ('oral instruction/counsel') traditions, which is "a product solely of the interrelationship between master and disciple; it is the non-repeatable discourse event in which the core of the Buddhist enlightenment comes to be manifestly disclosed" (see Matthew Kapstein's paper entitled 'gDams ngag: Tibetan technologies of the self' in Tibetan Literature: Studies In Genre (Peoples of America) p. 275). With the exception of two letters, which were added in an appendix to the second edition (pp. 283-301), detailing the author's 40-day travel on foot and horseback in the remote regions of Spiti and Lahul during the fall of 1953, this title is more like an overview of religio-cultural history than a travel account. I. Origins in India: Shkyamuni Buddha, Bodhgaya and Sarnath, cave-monasteries of Nalanda, etc. II. Tantric Buddhism: the five buddha-families, related mandala(s), feminine partners, so forth. III. Buddhism in Nepal: Pagan, Svayambhuta and Bodhi, religious syncretism, banra (honourable) descendants of Newari monks forming a caste from the mid-fourteenth century onward. Following an expensive ceremony of coming of age, "they resume the life of an ordinary layman, continuing in their now hereditary crafts as workers in silver, gold or crystal, as moulders of bronze images, as wood-carvers, workers in stucco and painters. Indeed things of such beauty have come and still come from their hands, that one's regret the decay of the institutions to which they belong, is tempered by wonderment at their individual skills" (pp. 110-11). Bear in mind Newari artisans' substantial contribution to the construction of sacred sites in Tibet during the 'later diffusion of Dharma. IV. Early myths: Buddhist origin myth of Tibetans, legendary rulers (Nyatri and Drigum Tsenpo), introduction of Buddhism, dharma-kings and their empire. This chapter heavily relies on the works of Tucci, Richardson, Thomas, et al. V. Religious teachers of Tibet: Padmasambhava at Mandi (Za-hor), the kings of Guge, Rinchen Sangpo and Atisha, Tabo monastery in Spiti, monastic Buddhism vs. tantric itinerant yogins, classification of Tantra. VI. Tibetan ceremonies: as observed by the author at the Nyingma(pa) Jiwong monastery in the Shar-Khumbu (Sherpa) area in 1954. VII. Reflections: "It is this credulity and a childlike delight in wonderment, which accounts for the popularity of stories of strange magical and psychic powers, which are attributed to renowned religious teachers, past and present. But the influence works both ways, for if at one stage popular beliefs may suggest falsification of higher concepts, at a later stage, when they are better integrated, they may themselves become the means for a new and equally valid expression of the same idea... Thus it is often difficult to decide what elements in this religion are tantric Buddhist or just plain Tibetan" (p. 279). Endnotes (as well as footnotes), brief chronological table, bibliography, general and Tibetan indices, 3 sketch maps, 90 bw photos, the large majority of which were taken by Snellgrove, 4 drawings. Hopefully, the Thai edition is prepared with a sturdier binding than the Nepali one whose pages in my copy are starting to fall out. If I'm not mistaken, having visited the site myself, the cover photo shows the large Taleju Bell (1736) facing the Royal Palace at Durbar Square in Pagan district of today's Kathmandu.

A seminal and still very relevant volume on Tibetan culture and religion, first published in 1957 and long out of print.

About the Author David Snellgrove, Ph. D., D. Litt., was elected Fellow of the British Academy in 1968. For a five year period he was Consultant for Buddhism at the then newly established Vatican Secretariat for non-Christian Religions. The author of numerous books and articles on Himalayan and Southeast Asian religions, he has been widely recognized for his extensive contributions to Asian scholarship.