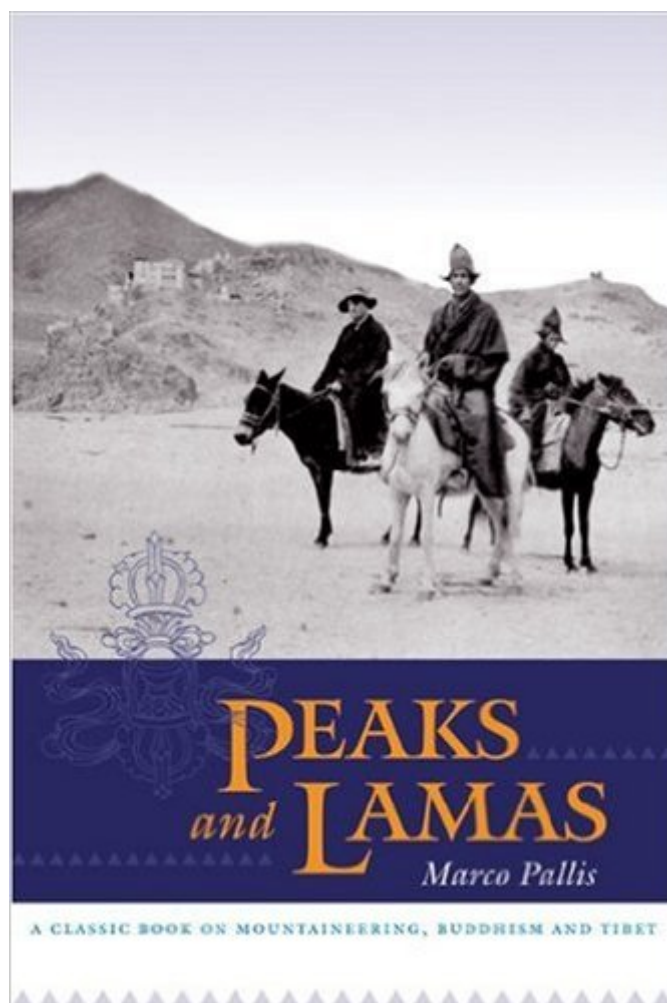


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Peaks And Lamas: A Classic Book On Mountaineering, Buddhism And Tibet



Synopsis

Several years ago, Wendell Berry recommended we read Marco Pallisâ™ Peaks and Lamas. He had obtained a copy of this out of print and elusive title, and upon reading it wrote saying, "I have a very high opinion of it." He praised the writing on travel and mountaineering, but he was specially drawn to the writing about Buddhism, the chapters on Tibetan Art, and went on "this is the best book, in my limited reading, in connecting a form of Buddhism with its sustaining culture. It would be useful to anybody interested in what a traditional culture is or might be, and how such a culture might preserve itself." With Wendell Berry, Gary Snyder and Robert Aitken offering encouragement, we could hardly ignore the imperative of putting this remarkable text, out of print for at least thirty years, back into print for a whole new generation of readers.

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Customer Reviews

Marco Pallis made several hiking treks with a number of companions into remote Himalayan regions in the 1930's. Primarily, this book is a narrative of those journeys. You will most likely not be able to find a writer in English today who can write so well, with such precision and yet lightness. Mr. Pallis takes us into the mountains of Ladakh and Sikkim, with an observant eye that can identify even the rare flowers along the path. An excellent chapter by his fellow traveler C.F. Kirkus gives us a first-hand account of a mountain-climbing experience that tested the nerves of the climbers and left them exhausted. The author's prose has true elegance, yet it is limpid and direct, so that the reader can easily imagine the delights of the almost pristine Himalayan mountain valleys and passes through which the explorers passed. We are given word-pictures of monasteries, remote towns, the

interesting clothing worn by a mountain tribe, the landscape as one rounds a bend or climbs up a trail ... And the author weaves into this travelogue many observations about the beliefs and customs of the people he meets along the way. The sometimes vexing, sometimes humorous vicissitudes of traveling with porters and packs add lightness to the narrative. There are notes about the history of the region ... the reader quickly realizes how little we understand of this remote part of the world. We are taken along a metaphysical path as well. One chapter is given over to an explanation of the Doctrine, as it is called among the Tibetans whom the author so admires. The Buddhist influence is seen in the context of the Tibetan (perhaps one should say Himalayan) beliefs that take the reader into a world quite apart from our materialist concerns. In other chapters, Mr. Pallis discusses, somewhat in passing, the Tantra and the deities of Hinduism. His closing section on Tibetan art may seem esoteric to some readers, but will interest others who are specialists in that area. A fine book, with some of the rarefied air of the Himalayas in it ... Remember, Marco Pallis was a noted Tibetan scholar; his book will probably not appeal to a weekend or casual reader. However, if you enjoy fine prose and good travel writing, and wish to gain a greater appreciation of the metaphysical underpinnings of Buddhist and Tibetan thought, you will like this book.

On an expedition to the Ganges-Satleg watershed, Marco Pallis first began to study the lamas' teachings and way of life, studying Buddhism, Tibetan living, and art. *Peaks And Lamas: A Classic Book On Mountaineering, Buddhism And Tibet* has long been recognized as a 'bible' on the Himalayan-Tibetan tradition of Buddhism and mountain climbing, and this edition returns to print a classic which has been unavailable for thirty years, adding fine black and white photos taken by Pallis and his friends.

This one I did likethe narrativethe going up the mountains.....skipped a bit in the buddhism chapterover all, I did ;learn quite a bit about the region, customs, topography...people.....I know that I will re read it again some day.....do that only with books I really like....

"Why climb?" On Sikkim's Zemu slope in 1933, this pioneering explorer wonders. He imagines "an unseen Lama" whispering: "There can be no true achievement so long as there persists the slightest hankering after an individual enjoyment of its fruits." (88) "The solitude to seek is the concentration of your own heart; if you have once found it, it will not matter where you are," Lachhen's abbot tells this mountaineer, who, thwarted from his Himalayan conquests, is asked his true purpose. (168) The elevated register reflects Pallis' attempt to render in careful English the tone

of dignified Tibetan, which he learned diligently and which later made him one of the leading interpreters of Buddhism to the West; he wrote the preface for Chögyam Trungpa's memoir "Born in Tibet" (also reviewed by me). This account, edited in 1974 from earlier versions, never tells you of Pallis' WWI experience in the trenches, where he was shot in the knee, nor affirms clearly his own initiation into the dharma in 1936 Sikkim. The author opts for presentation of what he sees and hears and learns, more than telling you his own background (he's from a Greek family who'd moved to London), emotions, or personal insights. As the narrative deepens, the travelogue merges into a metaphysical presentation of Buddhism as encountered at the foot of lamas with whom he meets. Pallis prefers a more self-effacing storyline to emphasize how, if in understated style, his mountain expeditions in 1933 once stymied lured him and his companions (rarely mentioned once the climbing so well described in opening chapters subsides) to the frontiers where Tibetan culture dwelt, if beyond the kingdom's southern borders. He differentiates bit by bit how a Westerner starts to separate once in the Himalayas from the dominant mindset, and the chapters unfold in the same manner, unfolding a deeper, elusive, yet tangible wisdom nearly imperceptibly. For instance, compassion vs. charity early on gets defined. Buddhism favors an intellectualized concept recognizing inter-relations between all creatures, whereas the Christian-tinged view stresses a "usually more passionately expressed virtue." (50) The Hindu label of those who deny that a believer in one faith cannot express devotion or reverence in another place of worship get denigrated as "pashu," trapped by parochialism to condemn the practices of another sect. He contrasts this with "Viras," or heroes. The philosophy with which Pallis later has been identified, Traditionalism, holds the unity beneath diversity of religious traditions, and the need to ground in whatever way beliefs are demonstrated a respect for roots and customs if these convey more good than evil, more sense than their abandonment would bring to a people who deny or leave behind a culturally and ethically solid practice. The way to Truth in a Tradition, Pallis holds, is like "a difficult mountain peak, which, though free of access to all mankind, is yet actually scaled by a chosen few, by those who are willing to pay the price in self-discipline, steadfastness, and risk." (125) Most doubt if the ascent is worth the risk; a few clamber up in pain, inching along. Once in a while, as with Milarepa (whose story later Pallis translated and here sums up), a mortal makes it by a perilous "direct path," as in Vajrayana or Tibetan Buddhism's "diamond-sharp" method of attaining insight. The book tells of "The Round of Existence" or the wheel of dharma, and of Tantric teachings. He does not romanticize the poverty he saw, but he does insist that spiritually, Tibet before the Communist attacks was advanced spiritually in ways we Westerners do not value. Impermanence after all came to Tibet, and for this, Pallis offers a sobering lesson in Buddhist aspiration towards

changelessness. Appendices delve into the defining Tibetan doctrine of the Bodhisattva, pre-1950 landed estates and medieval/ theocratic/ feudal parallels, criminal law, and especially artistic approaches. Pallis explains deftly the demon-filled thangkas or wall tapestries: "Many of those diabolical-looking figures are in essence identical with those who look so gentle. The Tibetan divinities all have a variety of aspects according to the functions that they are called upon to fulfil, perhaps even more according to the state of mind of the beholder." Therefore, "to the saint and the evil-doer the same divinity will show himself in widely differing guise. To the virtuous soul the Divine is necessarily glorious and comforting, but to an evil conscience the same can be a cause of horror and anguish." (213) The abodes of gods or purgatories ultimately, as with those who populate them, are illusory revelators of what the mind suffers when it has not attained enlightenment. There is an appeal to simplicity that may have inspired future countercultural readers. Pallis lauds the 1936 Ladakh villages however poor, for in them can be found a pair of "intangible amenities": "time to think without the sense of being driven, and the absence of organized persuasion and regimentation at the hands of a state or of a commerce that does not fall far short of it in power." (225) Vigilance, however, must be shown lest treasures of the tradition within such fastnesses decay. A visit to one dissolute monastery, Himi, finds wall paintings flaking: "Here the face of a Bodhisat, his finely chiselled features still composed under the impenetrable calm of Knowledge, looked out on us, though his body had all but crumbled away. There we saw a torso, there a pair of hands still making the gesture that bespeaks mercy. In a corner we discovered piles of books, volumes upon volumes, wood-block prints and manuscripts, all jumbled together, their loose leaves drifting about in hopeless confusion: who could tell what wisdom was on its way to oblivion?" (264) One reads this with a fearful premonition of the invasion of Tibet. Pallis updated the 1948 second ed. in his 1974 final version, and he makes asides to this decimation of so much of the Tibetan culture he loved in its far western reaches. His appended chapters discuss-- if in a clotted, denser critical fashion than a narrative that opened so clearly with its evocations of icy heights climbed by mere mortals-- how perennial wisdom impels seekers to find in suffering as justice the method of release. This is Buddhist metanoesis, a "radical change of heart," with mercy as compassionate truth, for self-questioning draws one away from suffering through the dharma-doctrine onto the spiritual path. (313) He insists to later devotees (he knew the Geshe Wangyal in his early travels; that lama later fled during the Cold War to New Jersey where he instructed Robert Thurman and inspired Allan Ginsberg as among the first Americans to learn about Tibetan Buddhism in the U.S.) how Tradition must form the shell around the kernel of insight. Adherence to a religious practice must precede the transcendence of dogma or ritual by careful discipline through a venerable authenticity. The seeker

must never mistake the emanation for the vision beyond, the trappings for the spirit within it. This reminds me of Chögyam Trungpa's later warning about "spiritual materialism," confusing the means with the end, attaching to the method of guidance without letting go for the ultimate goal of wisdom beyond representation. Pallis, like Trungpa, will inveigh against idolatry, confusion of the image with that beyond its manifestation. Pallis imagines a lama correcting an inquirer who puts Work or Service over Knowledge, which erodes the soul. "I would define it as an upsetting of the natural hierarchy, to the overvaluing of what is lower and the underrating of what is higher. Whoever holds to this principle is in no danger of misusing symbols, or of sacrificing to false gods, from the State or his own ego downwards." (356) The book's tone does hover around a shift in diction as it progresses, he revised it twice. It can be daunting, like the peaks Pallis earlier has ascended on paper. The metaphysical pilgrim replaces the physical journeyer, as Pallis himself has evolved imperceptibly from English trekker to Buddhist adept, without even telling us the moment outright. This is a modest yet ambitious chronicle, not for the impatient. It rewards study and contemplation. It's not the first book I'd begin with for Buddhism. But, it deserves its place on a higher shelf, so to speak, once a newcomer surveys and charts the terrain of deeper dharma. With chapters titled "Porters and Sahibs," "The Bursar of Spitak," and "Of Missionaries and Moths," this book carries a slightly antiquated air, one enhanced by the decades since which must have altered every place Pallis witnessed. He conjures up the fragile forests and harsh horizons well, and for this memento, Pallis left us with a valuable testament. Thomas Merton would ponder this work in the 1950s at his hermitage; it remains a measured, thoughtful, and composed legacy of how an English adventurer, skilled in the viola da gamba, a man of culture and taste, learns slowly to discover an alternate direction into lasting achievement, to a more satisfying triumph than planting a boot on a summit.

What a unique document of a time before many westerners encountered Tibetan Buddhism first hand.

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