

Dreaming Bhutan: Journey in the Land of the Thunder Dragon

Nicole Grace

Mani Press (Sep 23, 2011)

Hardcover \$34.95 (114pp)

978-0-9747852-5-7

It's understandable that many readers may be unfamiliar with Bhutan. Easy to overlook on a globe, it's a small country nestled between India and China, and one that doesn't play a role in international politics. Bhutan is focused on spiritual well-being, going so far as to keep a running tally on the "Gross National Happiness" of its people. In *Dreaming Bhutan: Journey in the Land of the Thunder Dragon*, Nicole Grace has created an exquisite book that illuminates the sense of mystery that surrounds Bhutan.

The book consists of full-page, full-color photographs, with accompanying descriptive text by Grace and selected quotations by various authors on each adjacent page. The photographs are impressive because of both their quality and the uniqueness of their subjects: Buddhist monks, prayer flags reaching toward the sky, mountains and temples shrouded in mist. From its first pages, the book's design stands out, with a beautiful map of Bhutan and, later, an image of the country's stunning flag. As with any good art book, it's the pictures that do the talking.

And they do so with great impact. "With few exceptions it is prohibited to take photographs of the inside of temples anywhere in Bhutan," writes Grace. While this might seem to be a limitation, it actually increases the reader's sense of mystery and wonder about the ornate buildings that loom in the Bhutanese landscapes of the book's images.

Regardless of one's spiritual leanings, *Dreaming Bhutan* is conducive to meditation—whether it be meditation of the sort the Buddhist monks of Bhutan practice, or simply the meditation of a reader engrossed in a transformative volume. If the book's sense of otherness might seem disconcerting for some, it is only because the country—and Grace's work—is so unique.

In fact, Grace might be the perfect observer of Bhutan. She is a Buddhist monk and has taught Buddhism all over the world, yet this book reflects her first visit to Bhutan. Her other books include the award-winning *Bodhisattva: How To Be Free*, and *Dreaming Bhutan* has already garnered its own prestigious honors from the 2011 International Book Awards and the 2011 Paris Book Festival.

The author writes of her time in Bhutan: "Like waking from a rare, exquisite dream ... I have attempted to capture a few precious moments." Indeed, when closing *Dreaming Bhutan*, one feels a bit like Samuel Taylor Coleridge awakened from his famous dream of Xanadu. Luckily, Nicole Grace has constructed a dream that can be revisited simply by opening her book.

PETER DABBENE (October 27, 2011)

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