

## Fortress of Self

[R Hodges](#) © Aug 10 2023

In a talk of June 13 1944 (*Wartime Meetings*) Gurdjieff gives a special exercise of a continuous sensation of the places where the arms and the legs connect to the body. He says that this can establish a “fortress.” He insists that the exercise is only for the person he is addressing. Nevertheless it is such an appealing exercise that many readers of the book attempt it—of course only after a fashion, it is doubtful if the stage of a permanent fortress is realized. That however is the most important idea in this exercise.

What is such a Fortress *for*, what enemies is it to protect the self from? Gurdjieff also describes the arms and the legs as “antennae.” They are the self’s means for affecting the world, and for receiving impressions from the world. For a full realization of this idea one would have to add a fifth limb, the head. The Fortress then is for protection from the downward-pulling forces of worldly life, to make the self free to contemplate unconditioned by “direct manifestations required for ordinary being-existence,” which is described in *Beelzebub’s Tales* (p. 310) as the meaning of the Eagle’s Wings of the Sphinx-like Emblem of Society Akhaldan, whose name is *Conscience*. It is related to another component, the “amber” that separates the virgin-breast-like Head from the body of the Emblem and represents “impartiality,” an orientation independent of ego, of self-interest.

I remember strong impressions from childhood, of singing in Methodist congregation certain hymns, the only standing ruins of my parent’s unsuccessful attempts to inculcate a religious foundation: *A Mighty Fortress is our God*, and even more resonantly *Rock of Ages/Cleft for me/Let me hide my self/In Thee*. Questions arose even then: What is this Fortress? What is Rock of Ages, why is God called that?

I understood much later that the function of inner work is the establishment of such a Fortress, a compact unified Self that can survive living *in* but not *of* the human outer world. Meditation, *sitting*, is a preparation for such a work in the world.

The remarkable woman Madame Alexandra David-Neel became famous for her years of pilgrimage during which she penetrated Tibet, forbidden to Westerners by English authorities (!) as well as by Tibetan ones. Among other extraordinary adventures, she lived under tutelage of a Guru for more than a year in a remote meditation cave high in the Himalayas. Upon her return to Europe she set up, in 1932, a center in the south of France called “Samten Dzong” which means in Tibetan “Fortress of Meditation.”

I visited Samten Dzong, in the town of Digne les Bains, in 1997, a brief intermezzo while driving from a Gurdjieff retreat in Switzerland to one in France, the latter mostly for people from London. Samten Dzong remains what she hoped to make it, a center for Tibetan Buddhist activity, often visited by Buddhist dignitaries as well as by curious tourists such as myself. At first I was puzzled by the fact that my colleagues from London seemed to disparage my reports on David-Neel’s enterprise. But of course her legacy was in a way a competitor in the spiritual marketplace. And her claims to have visited Tibet and practiced its innermost mysteries are more based in reality than similar claims by Gurdjieff, or at least by some of his students—solid

evidence of his ever having been in Tibet is strangely lacking despite many clever people having looked hard for it.

The impression made by David-Neel, in her several well-known books such as *Magicians and Mystics in Tibet* and *Secret Oral Teachings in Tibetan Buddhist Sects*, and in video documentaries in which she speaks simply and powerfully, at nearly 100 years of age, is that she herself was a *Fortress*. The true means of making oneself such a fortress are no doubt not just simple exercises of sensation, nor even a regular practice of *sitting*, but a whole life of *conscious labor*, of doing “what nobody else does”—the instruction from his dying grandmother that Gurdjieff reports (in *Meetings with Remarkable Men*) as having formed his life from an early age.



*Gyantse Dzong*  
Famous Tibetan Fortress-monastery  
Visited by David-Neel