

VAJRA SKY OVER TIBET

Journey into a Radiant and Endangered World

FILM SYNOPSIS

Vajra (*Vaj-ra*) is a Sanskrit word meaning the thunderbolt of awakening. *Vajrayana* is the form of Buddhism practiced in Tibet.

VAJRA SKY OVER TIBET is a cinematic pilgrimage bearing witness to the indomitable faith of Tibet's Buddhist community and the ultimate threat to its very survival. This is one of the rare documentaries to be filmed entirely inside Tibet and has received the blessing and endorsement of The Dalai Lama.

Set against a backdrop of breathtaking Himalayan terrain, this feature-length documentary offers a direct experience of some of the most revered temples, monasteries and festivals still surviving in Tibet today. Filming only in natural light, director and cinematographer John Bush traveled inconspicuously as part of a two-person crew along with a Tibetan guide and driver.

VAJRA SKY OVER TIBET presents the endangered Buddhist tradition of Tibet and its contemporary relevance. Luminous faces of faith glow in the flicker of butterlamp offerings within Lhasa's 1500 year-old Jokhang Temple. Going through a mountain pass of 17,000 feet into a land of snow peaks, turquoise lakes and golden blossoms, the nephew of The Dalai Lama narrates a 17th century Tibetan poet's meditations on the natural mind.

Bush also visited the source of his own spiritual practice of the last thirty-five years. As a western Buddhist filmmaker he was allowed unprecedented access. Many doors opened to him and his camera as Tibetans wanted the world to know their exquisite traditions are still alive but under serious threat.

The film bridges both the spiritual and political stories of Tibet as they are so inextricably bound together. If people in the West are being called upon to help save Tibet, this documentary wishes to show why this endangered culture is worth saving.

VAJRA SKY OVER TIBET reveals a deliberate 21st century policy of the Chinese government to suffocate this faith from within. Photos of the Dalai Lama are now illegal everywhere in Tibet. The atheist leaders of China are now maneuvering to install their own reincarnated Dalai Lama after the present Dalai Lama passes away.

The film journeys through Central Tibet. Visiting these esteemed pilgrimage sites, one glimpses their profound nature through the extraordinary art, architecture and traditions of classical Tibet. Responding to the denial of the basic human right to practice one's religion without interference, Tibetan pilgrims visit these legendary sites with a defiant ardor and overt displays of devotion.

The empty palaces of the Dalai Lama, the Potala and Norbulinka, echo the painful loss of the Tibetans' own living Buddha. During the Drepung festival, a giant tapestry scroll of the Buddha covers a mountainside as spiritually famished Chinese join with the multitude of Tibetan pilgrims. This closing scene invokes a redemptive vision of renewal for this tradition.

The director decided not to include interviews with people in Tibet because of possible reprisals. VAJRA SKY features the narration of Tenzin L Choegyel (nephew of The Dalai Lama) the acclaimed singer Dadon, who escaped over the Himalayas to India while eight months pregnant, and filmmaker John Bush.

VAJRA SKY's evocative soundtrack celebrates many of Tibet's greatest musicians and singers, overtone monastic chanting and an original Harmonic Chant score by renowned film composer David Hykes.





Tibetan civilisation has a long history, in the course of which it has assimilated many influences. It forms a distinct part of the world's precious common heritage. Humanity would be the poorer if it were to be lost.

- THE DALAI LAMA, from his special message for VAJRA SKY OVER TIBET

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

VAJRA is the thunderbolt of illumination. It is a story that truly wanted to be told. It is also a story the Chinese government does not want to be told. Pressure has been brought to bear directly on universities and museums not to screen the film or lose cultural cooperation in other areas.

While most documentaries about Tibet are actually filmed in the Tibetan exile communities of neighboring Nepal, India or Bhutan, VAJRA SKY OVER TIBET is one of the few films entirely shot inside Tibet. We did not ask for permission from the authorities and none was given.

I was welcomed as a western pilgrim in this tradition. Doors seemed to open from the inside. We received extraordinary access to many seldom-seen places in Tibet. I felt the compelling need of Tibetans to share what remained of their culture with the rest of the world.

As a filmmaker who had been practicing Tibetan Buddhism for 35 years, I was eager to travel there to shoot VAJRA SKY OVER TIBET, completing the Yatra Trilogy I began in 2001. As the first two films explored the lost Buddhist traditions of Southeast Asia, Tibet seemed to offer a look at a culture that was on the cusp of becoming yet another lost civilization.

I saw the Tibetan faithful responding to this repression with an indomitable devotion and resolve. I vowed to capture this dynamic in VAJRA SKY OVER TIBET – to show the painful absence of true religious freedom there; a fundamental violation of human rights.

The cynical strategy of Chinese politicians to co-opt this 1500 year-old tradition is an attempt to smother the Tibetan Buddhist faith within its own home. I saw the Tibetan faithful responding to this repression with a defiant ardor and overt devotion. I vowed to capture this dynamic in VAJRA SKY OVER TIBET – to show the painful absence of true religious freedom there; a fundamental violation of human rights.

As the story of Tibet today is inextricably both political and spiritual, I have attempted to be true to both of these aspects. This film is not character or plot driven and has no interviews, but instead celebrates the experience of place as its central dynamic.

On pilgrimage each place may reveal itself to pilgrims, sharing with them its mystery and essence. Likewise, the audience is invited to visit legendary places inside Tibet and to experience the living presence of these venues.

The film offers the audience an outer journey of pilgrimage and an inner journey of spiritual allegory. It is created to induce a meditative state where the exotic and familiar, the remote and intimate may interweave. The pacing, panning, pauses in narration, ambient sounds and music are calibrated to allow for a direct experience of sacred space.

My own teacher, Kalu Rinpoche, was one of the great meditation masters of Tibet and a teacher of The Dalai Lama. I was fortunate to have received his teachings as early as the 1970s. In Tibet, however, with nearly all the respected teachers in forced exile, the practice has weakened. Essential teachings now available in the west are no longer present in their homeland. Tibetans continually told me: "We want our teachers back." Some had not seen their teachers in 50 years. Many younger Tibetans have never had a qualified teacher at all.

The film guides us through the majesty of this tradition - its temples, monasteries and festivals. After the "Free Tibet" movement of the late '90s, the emphasis in the 21st century has now moved to "Save Tibet".

The presence of Tenzin L Choegyal as one of our narrators lends another dimension to VAJRA SKY OVER TIBET. Not only is he a Tibetan in exile, he is also the nephew of The Dalai Lama. Dadon sings throughout the film. Her narration has the genuineness of someone who escaped at the height of her career as one of Tibet's most popular singers for freedom in the West.

With all of the many dire scenarios on the planet today, I trust VAJRA SKY OVER TIBET shows that this tradition's emphasis on wisdom and compassion offers some core concepts to lessen suffering and to help bring peace to the rest of the world.

JOHN BUSH



Study of a threatened culture and people is beautifully shot inside Tibet's most sacred sites and it arrives with the blessing of the Dalai Lama.

- VARIETY

BIOGRAPHIES

PRODUCER & DIRECTOR • JOHN BUSH

John Bush is a photographer and filmmaker who has lived and traveled in Asia for more than three decades, sharing its sacred sites, culture and images in his work. His films and images are in museums and private collections around the world.

In 2001 he began filming the *YATRA TRILOGY* and working with post production talent at his New York studio. John founded Direct Pictures in 2002. His prior two documentary features are *DHARMA RIVER* and *PRAJNA EARTH*. Both were shot on location in Southeast Asia and are screening at various global venues.

John was the long time CEO and creative force of the award winning design company Illuminations. He founded Illumination Foundation in 2005 and is its Director.

EDITOR / ASSOCIATE PRODUCER • DÓNAL Ó'CEILLEACHAIR

Dónal Ó'Ceilleachair is an Irish filmmaker and editor living in New York for over 10 years. He has edited all the films of the *YATRA TRILOGY*. He is a union editor who also worked on projects as diverse as Wes Craven's *MUSIC FROM THE HEART* and Iranian director Amir Naderi's film *MARATHON*. In 1996, Dónal founded Ocularis, an exhibition forum in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. His own feature film is *CUZCO* (1999) and he collaborated on *WAR OF THE WORLDS* (2001).

ASSOCIATE PRODUCER • NADINE HELSTROFFER

French born, Nadine Helstroffer is a New York choreographer, editor and film producer who was location coordinator and associate producer for *VAJRA SKY OVER TIBET*. She is creating a dance art film, *SEASONS OF LIGHT*, in collaboration with filmmaker John Bush, shot entirely outdoors in New York City.

ASSOCIATE PRODUCER • V. OWEN BUSH

Owen has been the Creative Director of Pseudo Programs, Broadcast Designer and Associate Producer of MTV music video program AMP. His work has appeared on MTV, Nickelodeon, NBC, Discovery, SciFi, History Channel, and Showtime. He was the Editor for "Sonic-Vision" at New York's American Museum of Natural History and a new production of 3D animation: *MOLECULARIUM*.

NARRATOR • TENZIN L CHOEGYAL

Tenzin had a speaking part in Martin Scorsese's film *KUNDUN* and has narrated other works. He is active in supporting the cause of Tibetan refugees. Tenzin was raised within the Tibetan exile community in Dharamsala, India and attended Northwestern University. Tenzin is a nephew of The Dalai Lama.

NARRATOR • DADON

Dadon is an acclaimed singer who escaped from Tibet in 1992. She had the starring role in the film *WINDHORSE*. Dadon created original songs and chant for this film and for the film *SAMSARA*. She has released numerous albums in Tibet and the west. She has appeared at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center and numerous Tibetan Freedom concerts.

COMPOSER • DAVID HYKES

David Hykes is a composer, singer and sacred studies guide who founded the Harmonic Chant with The Harmonic Choir in New York in 1975. David has released 10 CDs of his music, and has also composed music for many films including *BARAKA*, *TRAVELERS AND MAGICIANS*, *MEETINGS WITH REMARKABLE MEN* and *DEAD POETS SOCIETY*.

VAJRA SKY OVER TIBET QUOTES

"Bush's stunning camera work adroitly captures the majestic landscapes and icons of Buddhism: its murals and artworks, monks and nuns... A tonic for Buddhists, no doubt, it offers many pleasures to atheists as well."

JOHN PATTERSON, VILLAGE VOICE

"Not only the year's best documentary, but it is also among the finest films ever made about religion... a work of power and glory."

PHIL HALL, FILM THREAT

"Vajra Sky Over Tibet is an illuminating meditation on that deepest of Buddhist philosophical concerns - impermanence. Study of a threatened culture and people is beautifully shot inside Tibet's most sacred sites and arrives with the blessing of the Dalai Lama."

RICHARD KUIPERS, VARIETY

"Astonishingly lovely... As the images unfold and the facts accrete like sand in a mandala, 'Vajra Sky Over Tibet' builds an atmosphere of serene outrage."

TY BURR, THE BOSTON GLOBE

An extraordinary and enthralling documentary about the richness of Tibetan Buddhism and the current threats to its continued existence in its homeland."

FREDERIC AND MARY ANN BRUSSAT, SPIRITUALITY & PRACTICE

"A well-photographed inside look at a fascinating culture and its people."

CORINA CHOCANO, LOS ANGELES TIMES

"Provides gorgeous sights and the ethereal soundtrack is quite beautiful."

NEW YORK MAGAZINE (CRITIC'S PICK)

"Images of the landscape, temples, and art dazzle with their gemlike luminosity and vaulting immensity."

PETER KEOUGH, BOSTON PHOENIX

"This compelling documentary is an introduction to the culture and practice of Vajrayana Buddhism and a protest against China's repressive treatment of Tibet."

WALTER ADDIEGO, SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

"Bush has accomplished his primary and extraordinary feat: documenting a culture that threatens to disappear. It's a loving effort, and an important addition to the body of films about this extraordinary, sacred region of the world."

THEODORE BALE, EDGE BOSTON



THE DALAI LAMA

A Special Message For Vajra Sky Over Tibet

Tibetan civilisation has a long history, in the course of which it has assimilated many influences. It forms a distinct part of the world's precious common heritage. Humanity would be the poorer if it were to be lost.

For more than a thousand years Tibetans have been custodians of the full range of the Buddha's teachings. These have been analysed, refined and, most important of all, put into practice, becoming the mainstay of Tibetan culture. In due course, the influence of Tibetan culture spread throughout Central Asia and the Himalayan regions. Temples and monasteries were established in these places and a constant stream of monks were made welcome in Tibet's religious and medical institutions. Many of these people, having completed their studies, would return to their homelands to teach and share what they had learned.

Over the last five decades and more, since the Communist Chinese took control of our country, the old ways have changed. Our religion and ancient cultural traditions have become targets for destruction. Our institutions, literature, artifacts and even individual proponents of our culture have come under attack. Those of us in exile, therefore, have had a responsibility to preserve what we could, not only for the benefit of our brothers and sisters who remain in Tibet, but also for the world at large.

John Bush, who has taken a long interest in our traditions, has created this full length documentary of pilgrimage to Central Tibet, bearing witness to the enduring faith there, that he has entitled *Vajra Sky Over Tibet*. I am grateful to him for his dedication to this project to raise awareness of the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition of Tibet as well as the current restraints on religious freedom there.

I firmly believe that as people become more aware of the reality of the situation in Tibet, they will naturally lend their support to our efforts to resume a dialogue with the Chinese authorities aimed at improving the lot of Tibetans in their homeland. I wish this film every success.

THE DALAI LAMA
May 25, 2005