

# JOURNEY INTO BUDDHISM™

## Vajra Sky Over Tibet

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# 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 analyzed, 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

# DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT



“*Yatra* is the Sanskrit word for pilgrimage or spiritual journey. The films of the *Yatra Trilogy* are cinematic pilgrimages to legendary places in Southeast Asia and Tibet. They also explore aspects of Buddhism, its teachings and practices, at its source.

Pilgrimage is known to every spiritual tradition. On such a journey, every moment may open to a sense of personal discovery and allegorical significance. In 1970, I traveled overland to India, where for 3 years I followed this ancient path, still very much alive there. Later, in my travels throughout Asia, I found this tradition surviving in many other places.

In my work as a filmmaker, I wished to share this direct experience of sacred space. Most films are character-driven, but in these three films, the living presence of place is the primary focus. Looking

through the lens became a devotional act for me at times—simply opening to what was revealed. To maintain an intimate “you are there” atmosphere, only existing light and a minimum of professional equipment were used, in order to preserve the natural ambience. As a longtime Buddhist practitioner, I was also granted access to many special venues.

The films of the *Yatra Trilogy* have been created to offer a new kind of viewing experience. The films are themselves meditations. Viewers are invited to relax and let the experience wash over them, making it their own journey. The films’ slow pacing, minimal narration, indigenous music and harmonic chant are also designed to induce an inner journey while traveling to these legendary places. Bon voyage.”

—John Bush

# DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

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## Director's Notes on the film *Vajra Sky Over Tibet*

"*Vajra* is a Sanskrit word—the thunderbolt of illumination that cuts through delusion. As a filmmaker who has been practicing Vajrayana Buddhism for over 30 years, I was thrilled to travel to Tibet to shoot *Vajra Sky Over Tibet*, completing this film trilogy.

After arriving in Lhasa with my associate producer Nadine Helstroffer, I was surprised, at first, by how people seemed free to practice their faith and how some of what had been destroyed under Mao and the Cultural Revolution was now rebuilt. Only after talking to many Tibetans did I realize that this was actually an elaborate stage management by the Chinese authorities to lessen international criticism of their Tibet policies and to satisfy tourists.

It was also revealed to be a cynical strategy of atheist Chinese politicians, co-opting this 1500 year-old spiritual tradition into their full control.

I then saw the Tibetan faithful responding to this repression with a defiant ardor, and overt displays of devotion.

Tibetans want the world to know that their exquisite traditions are still alive but deeply endangered. If we in the West are being called upon to help save Tibet, I wished to show why it is worth saving. Listening to the inspired elegance of its spiritual concepts, seeing its luminous art, hearing its magical harmonies, and witnessing the profound depth of its faithful might induce us to act before it were to fully disappear.

Receiving the endorsement of His Holiness The Dalai Lama, and offering his special message for the film was an enormous motivation in bringing this work to the world. His generous message was pure inspiration.

– John Bush

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## About John Bush (2007)

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, libraries, and private collections around the world.

He first traveled to India on Yatra in 1970 and has studied with many of the great Asian masters. His principal Tibetan teacher was Kalu Rinpoche—one

of Tibet's most esteemed meditation masters. John has practiced and taught in the major traditions of Buddhism.

His studio, Direct Pictures, is in the East Village of New York City. He has completed his Asian pilgrimage epic *Yatra Trilogy: Dharma River, Prajna Earth, and Vajra Sky Over Tibet*. The films are screening in prestigious venues around the world.

# ABOUT VAJRA REALM AND NADINE HELSTROFFER



*Vajra Realm* is another name for classic, traditional Tibet. Nadine created this pilgrimage in dance as a western Buddhist bearing witness to both the majesty and tragedy of what remains in present-day Tibet.

Including some of the greatest women singers of Tibet and the imagery of its female Buddhas, this choreographic journey pays homage to the empowerment and wisdom of women within Vajrayana Buddhism.

French-born choreographer and dancer Nadine Helstroffer has lived and performed in New

York City for much of her adult life. Her many works have been highly acclaimed by critics and audiences alike in the US, Europe, and Asia.

Nadine is now creating a feature-length dance art film, *Seasons of Light*, with filmmaker John Bush. Based on universal Buddhist principles, the film presents her choreography in the company of seven other dancers and is shot entirely in outdoor locations of New York.

Nadine is also an associate producer for *Vajra Sky Over Tibet*.

# ABOUT THE NARRATOR

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Tenzin L. Choegyal, a narrator in *Vajra Sky Over Tibet*, is a nephew of The Dalai Lama. His father, Ngari Rinpoche, is the youngest brother of His Holiness.

Tenzin was raised within the Tibetan exile community in Dharamsala, India, and attended Northwestern University in Evanston, IL. He now lives in Seattle, WA with his wife and daughter.

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.

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

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The soundtrack of *Vajra Sky Over Tibet* is a remarkable synthesis of universal Harmonic Chant with David Hykes and the Harmonic Choir, original devotional compositions by Tibetan singer Dadon, and music from the greatest singers and musicians of the Himalayas.

*Tibet*. It is a union of East and West harmonies that is truly universal and profound.

The evocative and powerful vocal collaborations between David Hykes and Dadon are breathtaking and were created exclusively for *Vajra Sky Over*

The mystical singer Yungchen Lhamo, the dramatic flute of Nawang Khechog, and the spiritual offerings of Nepali nun Choying Drolma with American musician Steve Tibbetts all weave together a soundscape in *Vajra Sky Over Tibet* that reveals the poignant story of today's Tibet.

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## About the Narrator and Singer Dadon

Dadon, who composed original works for *Vajra Sky Over Tibet*, is a highly accomplished musical artist who was born in a monastery in Lhasa, Tibet. As a talented teenager, she was trained in classical music and voice in Beijing and then returned to Tibet. Dadon recorded and sold millions of albums in Tibet and China during the late '80's and early '90's.

over the Himalayas into India. Since arriving in America in 1993 she has performed in Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, Tibetan Freedom Concerts and other respected venues.

In 1992, Dadon, who was 5 months pregnant, fled from political persecution in Tibet by walking

Dadon starred in and composed songs for the film *Windhorse* and for the award-winning film *Samsara*. She has performed with Sheryl Crow, Arlo Guthrie, Natalie Merchant, Michael Stipe, Patti Smith, Philip Glass, Ritchie Havens, Yo-Yo Ma and many other artists.

# ABOUT THE MUSIC



## About David Hykes and Harmonic Chant

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 became the first western musician to deeply explore the overtone chanting traditions of Tibet, Mongolia, and Tuva. His pioneering studies and collaborations led to the first-ever joint concerts

with the Gyuto and Gyume monks, an evening held under the auspices of His Holiness The Dalai Lama.

David has released 10 CDs of his music, and has also composed sound for many films including *Baraka*, *Travelers & Magicians*, *Meetings with Remarkable Men* and *Dead Poets Society*.



## David Hykes on *Vajra Sky Over Tibet*

Composing and performing original music for John Bush's inspiring and moving *Vajra Sky Over Tibet* allowed me to joyously come full circle, working again with mantra-inspired themes, which are what first drew me to Vajrayana chanting of the Gyuto monks in the early 1970's.

I was grateful for the encouragement by John Bush, and from my Lama, to explore mantra composition

in light of Harmonic Chant. The transcendent and poignant themes of *Vajra Sky Over Tibet* were very inspiring to me. The open, creative and collaborative climate John creates also made possible the unique collaboration with renowned Tibetan singer Dadon. From true seeing and hearing, transformation is sure to arise.

– David Hykes