

film

TERRI DUNBAR-CURRAN

"LIVING life with an open heart and mind, an understanding of the interdependence of everything and the preciousness of human existence and compassion for our fellow beings is better for you, better for others and better for the future of our world. It's as simple as that," says film-maker Victress Hitchcock.

She will bring two of her films, *When the Iron Bird Flies – Tibetan Buddhism Arrives in the West* and *Blessings – The Tsoknyi Nangchen Nuns of Tibet*, to *Awake!* at Labia on Orange from October 13 to 27. The first international Buddhist film festival to be held in Africa, *Awake!* will be presented by Exploring Consciousness and will feature a variety of films looking at different aspects of Buddhism.

Hitchcock focuses on the teachings and practices of Tibetan Buddhism in her films, emphasising bringing our lives and spiritual paths together.

"It is in how you live your life that the wisdom of these teachings is manifest. Nowhere is that more apparent than in the story of Tibetans, such as the Dalai Lama and other Buddhist teachers, you will meet in *When the Iron Bird Flies* and the Nangchen nuns you will meet in *Blessings*," she says.

In 2005 Hitchcock was invited to travel with Tsoknyi Rinpoche, a renowned Tibetan Buddhist teacher, along with a party of mostly woman students to film a trip to Nangchen in Eastern Tibet. There she would meet some of the 3 000 nuns who practise under Tsoknyi Rinpoche's guidance in remote hermitages and monasteries.

"This is an ancient and quite amazing lineage of extraordinary female practitioners who have carried on a yogic tradition in this area for centuries, since it was started by his first incarnation – Tsoknyi Rinpoche the first. In a country where patriarchy has reigned in the culture and in the practice of Buddhism, this was quite revolutionary."

From the more than 70 hours of footage they left with, Hitchcock decided to put together *Blessings*, to share the story of their encounter with the nuns.

When the Iron Bird Flies was also initiated as a project in

MESSAGES FROM THE SILENCE



NEW JOURNEYS: Film-maker Victress Hitchcock will participate in the *Awake!* film festival at the Labia Theatre. Here she prepares for her journey to visit the Tsoknyi Nangchen nuns of Tibet in her film *Blessings*.

collaboration with Tsoknyi Rinpoche. When he saw the favourable response to the film he was excited by the idea of a film helping to communicate Buddhist teachings in an engaging and entertaining way.

He asked Hitchcock if she could make a film about how the teachings practised in caves in Tibet were spreading into modern Western society.

"The only directive he gave us was to look and see 'what was working and what wasn't'.

"I became fascinated by this in particular because of my own journey as a Tibetan Buddhist, which began in the late 1960s in

India. And the knowledge of how important finding this way of working with my mind and emotions has been in my life. It was that that I wanted to really convey. The film became a personal exploration as well."

Over the years Hitchcock has had the opportunity to study with some of the most important Tibetan teachers of the 20th and 21st centuries, and while her co-producer, Amber Bemak, is of a newer generation of Tibetan Buddhists, she has also done a lot of studying.

"We were fortunate in that we had the background to be able to come up with the questions we

wanted to explore with the nuns in *Blessings* and with the teachers and practitioners we interviewed in *Iron Bird*. The research behind the films was an organic process which mainly was based on the interviews we conducted."

Hitchcock discovered many things while working on the films that deepened her understanding and practice of Buddhist teachings.

"I think the main thing, if I had to pick one, is the understanding that the study and practice of Buddhism are deeply personal. It's about becoming intimate with your mind and heart and it takes place every moment of your life.

"The bottom line is it's all about

how you can transform your mind and live your life in a way that increases your happiness and the happiness of others. I saw that up close with the nuns during filming *Blessings* and I was able to experience what it's like to be in the presence of people who lived their lives from that place. That was a real eye-opener."

There were many special moments that stood out for her while filming. One was while she was working on *When the Iron Bird Flies*, during a teaching that Anam Thubten gave in the mountain town of Crestone.

"The very last statements in the film are from that evening, where he asked us all to 'Sit now and then, in silence, ask ourselves this question: Am I ready to let go of everything?' That challenge is something I reflect on a lot when I am feeling anxious, or angry or particularly attached to my point of view."

Other films on the *Awake!* bill include *An Uncommon King*, *Dharma River*, *Karmapa*, *Never Give Up*, *More Than 1 000 Days of Meditation*, *Our Life is Like Our Breath*, *Shugendo Now*, *The Devotion of Matthieu Ricard*, *The Only Son*, *Tutu and Tenzin*, *Yangsi*, and *Zen*.

Hitchcock is looking forward to participating in *Awake!* and talking to people interested in travelling on a spiritual path and finding ways to live life more consciously in a whole new culture. She believes that festivals like this are important in that they bring non-mainstream films which explore topics that many people are grappling with to a wider audience.

"I have shown my films in many different settings, Buddhist and non-Buddhist, and I find they speak to both audiences very well. They are not 'educational', though people do learn from them. They are actually quite entertaining.

"I would encourage anyone who is interested in what it means to be a human being in this day and age to come."

● Hitchcock will introduce *Blessings* on Sunday at 4pm, followed by *When the Iron Bird Flies* at 6.15pm. She will be available to talk about the films and answer questions. For more information, call 021 424 5927, or see www.exploringconsciousness.org.za

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