



Sky Mind Retreats

Sacred Bhutan:

Walking and Meditation in the Land of the Thunder Dragon

**with Susie Harrington
assisted by Kathy Cheney
November 23 – December 8, 2024**

More Information

This trip is a rare opportunity to travel behind the scenes in a country steeped in centuries of Buddhist life and practice. Our focus will be on the active monasteries and temples that are nestled everywhere, into cliff sides, ridgetops, and wide-open spaces. Wherever possible we will practice in these monasteries, listen to the chanting monks, and meet with the local Rinpoches and Khenpos who guide monastic life, and Tulkus who embody the reincarnation of previous Rinpoches. Some of the temples that we will visit are remote, inaccessible by road, and infrequently visited by tourists.

On most days we will walk-visiting remote temples, exploring villages, or, on one day, hiking from town to town. See below for a description of physical activity. We will stay in comfortable and interesting Bhutanese lodges, plus one night of 'luxury' camping with views of the Himalaya range. See below for a description of the overnight trek that will take us past many remote temples and hermitages.

We will support our journey and enrich our experience through meditation practice, reflection, and group sharing. On most days we will practice sitting and/or walking meditation, and throughout the trip we will process our experiences through dharma talks from Susie, and reflection and discussion within the group. The trip will culminate in an overnight trek to Bumdra monastery and the famous Taktsang (Tiger's Nest) Monastery built directly into a vertical cliff.

Our shared intention will be to be present to our experience, to be open and available to the people we meet and the places we visit and use all that we experience to soften our hearts and open our minds. At times, or for partial days, we will walk, sit, or explore in silence, but this will not be a traditional silent retreat. While an established meditation practice is not required, openness and willingness to participate with the group, and a desire for spiritual exploration as a part of travel is necessary. We will be encouraging you to take up a regular meditation practice prior to the trip and we will send you resources.

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Bhutan

The Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan is the only country in the world that makes political and economic decisions that take into account a measurement of Gross National Happiness, and one of the few countries in the world that has successfully resisted the wave of globalization. The country was quite isolated from the rest of the world until the 1960's, televisions were not allowed in the country until 1999, and cigarettes and plastic bags are still banned. The capital city of Thimpu has no traffic lights, the national sport is archery. Residents enjoy a culturally intact lifestyle, complete with well-preserved festivals, traditional food and dress, and traditional architecture.

Padmasambhava (also known as Guru Rinpoche) brought Buddhism to Bhutan in 747AD, and it has flourished ever since, creating a country where wisdom, compassion, and mindfulness are a part of daily life and culture. Temples and stupas arise from the landscape everywhere, and monastic life is active and strong.

Travel in Bhutan

The Bhutanese government has imposed strict travel regulations in an effort to minimize the impact of tourism on their people, and to ensure that tourism is generating adequate revenue for the country. A substantial daily rate is charged for each traveler, which is what makes this trip more expensive than most trips in developing countries. We are required to arrange a custom trip with a travel and trekking outfitter, which means that we will have our own private transportation, a customized itinerary with a focus on Buddhist sites, history and current practices, very comfortable hotels, and our own local guide for the entire trip. Our guide, Namgay Tshering, is outstanding in his knowledge and hospitality. Namgay previously served in the Bhutan Parliament and has personal connections to teachers at many of the monasteries we will visit. His sister is a nun in residence at a nunnery that we will visit and support with gifts.

Covid Guidelines

Covid continues to be a factor in our world. Currently you can plan to take an antigen test within 24 hours before our first meet up in Bangkok and we will ask you to pack extra antigen tests and mask. Expect to be asked to take extra care in the 10 days before travel and to mask in airports and as much as possible while traveling. A positive Covid test would put your planned trip at risk! We will update the protocols in place for the retreat as requirements and recommendations evolve. We will be subject to any requirements Bhutan has in place at the time of our travel there.

About Susie & Kathy

Susie will guide practice sessions and integrate dharma teachings into the trip. She has had many years of experience as both a teacher and a guide. For nearly two decades and over ten trips Susie has been guiding groups, leading retreats and visiting Bhutan. She has developed an intimate relationship with the people and the place. Kathy will take care of logistics and provide personal support. Kathy is an experienced retreat coordinator and has supported beginning and experienced meditators on retreat and in daily life. This will be Kathy's fourth trip assisting on this journey. We both carry the intention of supporting you

in your outer and inner journeys, and we will provide as many options as possible to accommodate the group's interests and individual needs.

Susie Harrington has been practicing Buddhist meditation for more than 20 years, focusing on Insight Meditation since 1995. Susie began teaching the Dharma in 2005 under the direction of her teachers Guy Armstrong, Jack Kornfield, and Gil Fronsdal. She has also practiced with and been influenced by a number of Tibetan teachers. Believing nature to be a natural gateway to our true selves, Susie frequently offers retreats in the natural world. Her teaching is deeply grounded in the body, emphasizing embodiment of our practice in speech and daily life. She is a graduate of Hakomi Therapy (a somatic psychotherapy modality) She has been an outdoor professional for over 30 years, including years as a river guide, mountaineering guide, and backcountry ranger. She teaches residential and wilderness retreats throughout the Four Corners area and internationally.

Kathy Cheney has studied and practiced meditation and the Dharma in the Insight and Soto Zen tradition, since 2000, Kathy was introduced to Buddhist teachings when she went to Spirit Rock Meditation Center and has sat retreats at Spirit Rock, Gaia House and other centers. Kathy has taught meditation to children and adults in the San Francisco Bay Area and in Hawaii. She has managed meditation retreats and coordinated programs for Spirit Rock, Sacred Mountain Sangha, Abhayagiri Monastery and Aloka Vihara/Aloka Earth Room.

The Trek, Physical Activity, Fitness, and Altitude

This is an active, walking trip, and to enjoy the physical activity you should be in good health, with good walking fitness. There is no need for speed - we will walk at a comfortable, steady pace - but you should be able to walk for 2-3 hours at a time (with breaks). Much of the country is built on hillsides, as are many of the temples; you should be prepared for going up and down many stairs and steep sections of trail.

The most challenging day will be the first day of our overnight trek, which comes at the end of the trip, after we have acclimatized to the altitude. All gear will be carried by horses on the trek, except for your small daypack with extra clothing and water. The first day of the trek is approximately 5 hours of hiking, with 3,000' of elevation gain. We will camp at 13,400'. The second day will be 4-5 hours of mostly downhill walking, including several steep sections. It is possible to rent a horse to ride for the first day, or as a backup in case you get too tired, at a cost of \$10. Riding horses are not available for the second day of the trek.

***Important:** If you don't already get some basic walking exercise, we suggest that in the months leading up to the trip you begin to walk several times a week, including some aerobic, uphill walking. Let us know if you would like some guidelines for increasing your fitness, or if you have any questions about the physical activity involved in this trip.

Except for the trek, we will be sleeping at altitudes ranging from 4,000' to 7,400', with one night at 9,500'. We will hike at a wider range of elevations – sometimes higher elevations to see the sites while also increasing our acclimatization.

You can choose to not do the trek and still meet us at Taktsang Monastery. If you make this choice in advance all the costs for your hotel, transportation, a guide/driver for the time you are not with the group, food, etc. will be covered. If you make this decision while we are on the trip, we will ask that you cover the additional night of lodging. (The rest will still be covered) We ask this as we will have already paid the non-refundable trek costs.

Food

Bhutanese food is usually locally grown, unprocessed, and healthy, with lots of vegetable dishes. Rice, potatoes, and chilies are the primary staples. Meat, poultry and seafood are usually options, and vegetarians can be easily accommodated. We will most likely see Tibetan, Indian, and Chinese influences in the food, including Tibetan momos and thukpa noodles. The national dish is ema datshi, a spicy concoction of chilies and yak cheese. If you have special food requirements these can probably be accommodated, especially common ones like gluten-free and no-dairy. Be sure to let us know about special food requirements well in advance.

Weather

We will be visiting Bhutan at the very end of fall and the beginning of winter, when crowds are small, and the weather is sunny and cool. The weather is typically pleasant, although a bit of clouds or rain here and there is a possibility. Once the sun goes down temperatures drop sharply and can reach freezing overnight. You will want warm, toasty clothes for this trip. We will send a What to Bring list soon after you register.

Logistical Details

Cost

\$6,960, plus \$930 airfare for RT Bangkok to Paro, Bhutan. (Total cost = \$7.890) Single room supplement is an additional \$900.

What's Included: (basically everything!)

- Lodging, including the first night in Bangkok
- Three meals a day, starting with dinner on November 23.
- All activities on the itinerary
- Donations to the nunneries and monasteries we will visit.
- Transportation
- Bottled drinking water
- Domestic airfare (Jakarta to Paro)
- Bhutan Visa- \$40 (we will arrange this for you)

- RT airfare from Bangkok to Paro, Bhutan (This flight will be arranged for you, and you will pay the outfitter \$930 through Sky Mind Retreats.)

What's Not Included:

- Teacher Support for Susie. In the spirit of offering dharma teachings without charge, Susie has chosen to not be paid for this trip. You may make an offering of teacher support to her before or after the trip, and donations are tax deductible.
- RT airfare to Bangkok. (You will arrange this on your own.)
- Final night stay and meals in Bangkok, if your flight leaves the following day
- Optional tips for local guides
- Medical insurance, as required by Bhutan. (See below.)

Payments

We will be making reservations for our flight from Bangkok to Paro, as soon as the minimum number of ten people have registered. *(Do not make your flight reservations to Bangkok until we let you know the minimum number has been reached)* Once the reservations have been made, this amount (\$930) is nonrefundable, unless someone else registers to take your place and we are able to transfer the reservation. (Reservations must be made far in advance, as it is the only national airline to serve Bhutan. Also please note that a slight increase may occur due to changes in cost by airlines. If this happens we will adjust the amount due accordingly.)

Due with Registration	\$1000 non-refundable deposit plus \$930 for Bangkok-Paro flight (Total due at time of registration = \$1930)
March 1, 2024	\$1990
June, 1 2024	\$1990
September 1, 2024	\$1990

** We request that All payments will be made by check – address provided on registration form. If you need to pay by credit card a processing fee will be added.

Cancellation Policy *(Please read carefully)

Because we must make non-refundable deposits in Bhutan, we have the following cancellation policy. You will be making nonrefundable deposits for the trip expenses, and we cannot refund payments except according to the following cancellation policy.

The \$1000 deposit is non-refundable, and, once plane reservations have been made, the \$930 airfare is non-refundable. Refunds can be made as follows:

- Cancellations between March 1-May 31, 50% of the first payment (\$995).
- Cancellations between June 1-Aug 31, 50% of the first two payments (\$1,990)
- Cancellations between September 1-September 15, 50% of first three payments (\$2,985).

*After September 15, 2024 no refunds can be made. If Sky Mind Retreats needs to cancel the trip for any reason, all fees, including the deposit, will be returned. Plane flight costs cannot be reimbursed.

Travel Insurance

Things happen! It is required that you purchase trip insurance, which will reimburse your trip cost if you cannot travel due to injury or illness. The Bhutanese government requires all travelers to purchase medical travel insurance, and most of these policies include trip cancellation. Be aware that you usually are required to purchase the policy shortly after you register for the trip and make your first payment in order for the trip cancellation insurance to be effective. Please read carefully the benefits for different plans and you might consider the 'cancel for any reason' clause available in some plans. You might consider using the platform <https://www.squaremouth.com/> to compare policies and cost to see what is best for your circumstances.

Two companies that we like are:

Worldwide Trip Protector, www.travelinsured.com or [1-800-243-3174](tel:1-800-243-3174).

World Nomads, <https://www.worldnomads.com/travel-insurance/>

Getting There

We will begin our trip in Bangkok, the afternoon before we depart for Bhutan. Most flights from the United States arrive late at night, so you will probably arrive in Bangkok the night before. We suggest coming an extra day or two early, if you have the time, so that you can adjust to the different time zone. More details on arranging your flights will be sent once you register. As of April 2022, the round-trip cost from San Francisco to Bangkok starts at \$800. Please wait to make your flight arrangements to Bangkok until we let you know that we have the minimum number of participants (ten) before planning to proceed.

*****Remember that you will need a current passport!***
(with at least 6 months, beyond our trip dates, before expiration)**

Kathy Cheney will be handling all pre-trip registration, information, payments, and questions. She has been on this trip and will be able to help with most things. Please feel free to contact her or Susie if you have additional questions at any time.

All payments checks should be made out to Sky Mind Retreats. The postal mailing address for payment is:

Kathy Cheney
2699 Bloomfield Rd.
Sebastopol, CA 94572

After you register, we will send more logistical details about travel, vaccinations, and what to bring. Please feel free to contact either of us by phone or email if you have any questions!

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