



Roshi Joan Halifax at a wedding blessing.

Photo by Chris Richards. © Joan Halifax

10: ROSHI JOAN HALIFAX

FEARLESS, FIERCE, AND FRAGILE

*A true heroine of engaged Buddhism reflects on living,
dying, and her heart's work¹*

THE MOUNTAINS IN TIBET stretch toward a sky so immense it can be intimidating, even unsettling. “The Tibetan landscape exemplifies a quality of mind that is characterized by vastness,” says Roshi* Joan Halifax. “It’s a dark blue that goes on forever. You can almost see stars in the daytime. The clouds are within reach.” Roshi has just returned from her seventh pilgrimage to Mount Kailash, Tibet’s holiest mountain. “The landscape just *is* the mind, and the mind is that landscape,” she says. “It either makes you completely paranoid—and some people become very fearful and self-centered there—or something breaks, and the vastness of the horizon liberates you.”

For Roshi Joan, crossing the Tibetan Plateau is an experience like no other. Not much grows on the boundless stretches of tundra—just modest stubs of vegetation on which the yaks feed. Travelers must cope with dramatic temperature changes and oxygen-deprived altitudes; fierce sunlight, wind, and dust; exhaustion and blistered feet. Roshi believes that such a raw, unfiltered experience of the elements can bring about deep spiritual transformation.

¹*Roshi* is a Japanese honorific title for a teacher.

EVERY DAY IS AN EVEREST

Although she is a priest in a Japanese Zen lineage, Roshi Joan has extensive ties to Tibet and to Tibetan teachers, with whom she has studied since the early 1970s. Her recent expedition was one of ten journeys she has made to Tibet. True to her mission of combining meditation with helping people wherever she can, she invited doctors and clinicians to join the trip. More than thirty years ago Roshi started the Nomad Clinics to help alleviate what she calls the “bottomless need” for health care in these isolated, barren areas.

“We could have arrived and not helped anybody,” she says. “We could have just plowed through here and on to Mount Kailash, but we have an opportunity to reduce suffering, so let’s do it!”²² Each of the thirty-one pilgrims brought fifty pounds of medical supplies to distribute in the mountains of Humla in Nepal. They treated nearly one thousand patients, many of whom had traveled great distances on foot in hopes of receiving care. One man had hiked for three days with a shattered arm. Another man, nearly blind, had walked for two days to get eyeglasses.

From Humla, the group trekked toward the Tibetan border, stopping to set up temporary medical clinics in villages along the way and performing “impromptu medical moments.” When a trekker from another group fell and fractured her leg, a physician from Roshi’s group set it right there on the trail. Once inside Tibet, the travelers camped on the southern shore of Lake Manasarovar, the world’s highest freshwater lake, before advancing into the shadow of glaciated Mount Kailash, a mountain so holy the locals forbid ascending to the top. Roshi’s group completed the pilgrimage around its base over a period of six days, crossing one pass at 18,600 feet.

The fact that Roshi, now in her seventies, could make this trip at all is remarkable, given the physical challenges she has faced over the past four years. During a trip to Toronto in June 2008, Roshi Joan slipped and fell on a hard bathroom floor, shattering her greater trochanter. She spent thirty hours strapped to a gurney in an emergency room, then

another two days waiting for surgery. Two months after the accident, she was walking with crutches, gingerly.

It was not clear that she would ever hike again, much less embark on another pilgrimage to the sacred mountain. She said then, gesturing to the hills outside the window at Prajna Mountain Center in New Mexico, “From this distance, the mountains are a beautiful artifact. I’m pretty sure I’ll be able to walk again, but I don’t know if I’ll be able to walk as I used to. Now, every day is an Everest.”

THE TREACHEROUS PATH TO THE MASTER’S CAVE

The road to Prajna Mountain Center in one of the wildest parts of New Mexico can be impassable after a rainstorm. Massive potholes open wide beside slippery ruts, causing the vehicle to lurch and heave. It seemed odd that Roshi Joan would request to be interviewed at “the refuge,” as it is known, instead of at her Zen center just five minutes from downtown Santa Fe. Was this a kind of trial, a koan about a treacherous path to the master’s mountain cave?

It did make sense, though, that a woman who had once driven a VW van by herself across the Sahara would ask a visitor to make this trek. A woman who, at age sixty-five, had snow-shoed through a blizzard in the dark for four hours to reach the refuge. A woman who in March 2008 had hiked around China and Japan, in the footsteps of Dogen Zenji,^{*} on a foot she didn’t realize was broken.

“She’s the most fearless person I’ve ever met,” said Peg Murray, her assistant, who graciously offered a ride up the road in Roshi’s Toyota 4Runner. Navigating the deep ruts with ease, Murray talked about the first time she had made the drive. Roshi Joan was her passenger, and the spring run-off had dissolved the road to slippery clay muck. Deprived of traction, the knobby wheels slid across the surface as if it were ice. Every time Roshi got out to assess their predicament, she sank up to midshin in mud. “I wanted to turn back,” Murray said. “But Roshi

^{*}Dogen Zenji (1200–1253) founded the Soto school of Zen in Japan.