

Between Two Mountains

John Daido Looi Roshi walks the difficult path between fear of living and fear of dying. Spring 2002 • Tricycle

When we're overwhelmed, an alternative to going numb is to become angry. We set up a target to deflect our feelings away from ourselves, thus avoiding any responsibility for them. Yet, like fear, we create anger by a series of thoughts that result in a particular emotional and physiological state. Anger doesn't just happen to us. If we're able to catch an angry thought as it's budding, we can let it go. The same is true of despair or hopelessness. And when letting go is too difficult, a good medicine for dealing with these emotions is to reach out and help others....

This is not an easy process to go through. The strength to engage it arises out of our meditation practice, our vows to awaken, our commitment to wisdom and compassion, and our spiritual fearlessness....

The fearlessness of the great spiritual teachers like Moses, Jesus, Saint Theresa, Buddha, and Bodhidharma was the fearlessness of the spiritual warrior. Different from stoicism, naïveté, or arrogance, this fearlessness is selfless, generous, and compassionate. Fearlessness is not a matter of ignoring fear, but of really acknowledging it and being empowered by it. We're confident that we can deal with whatever presents itself to us, regardless of the outcome....

When we do not separate ourselves from our fear, we transcend it. Each one of us is born with this same kind of fearlessness, but we need to realize it as our own lives, the life of all buddhas, all beings....

We are living in painful times. From the point of view of the Buddha-dharma, crises are also opportunities to transform our lives. We can shy away from the difficulties, hoping that if we ignore them long enough, they will fade into the cobwebs of our mind. Or we can convince ourselves that we are dealing with them in our practice, while simply suppressing them. Until we honestly go through the process of working with our feelings as they arise, they will just fester within us, waiting to resurface....

We can choose to get lost in our personal terror, but the fact remains that we are the only ones who can heal fear, anger, and pain by the way we use our minds. The ten thousand things, all the barriers, all the peace and the joy of this world, are nothing but the self. The question is, how do we understand it? Now more than ever we need to trust ourselves and let the years we have put into our practice come alive.