

STEPH DAVIS

The free-climber heads to Tokyo to talk about conquering fear

BY REBECCA MILNER

“I think all climbers spend a large percentage of their energy dealing with fear,” says Steph Davis. And she’d know: in the past decade, the 30-something American has emerged as one of the top climbers in the world, setting records and claiming first ascents on some of the toughest peaks on the planet.

To get a sense of what this means, just watch a video of Davis carefully, calmly working her way up “The Diamond”—the east face of Longs Peak in Colorado’s Rocky Mountains. It’s over 900 feet of sheer vertical rock, with nothing but hairline cracks for handholds, and she climbs it without a safety rope. This style, relying only on one’s own hands and feet, is called free soloing. It’s climbing at its most intense and intimate, and a form in which she excels.

After dropping out of law school, Davis spent the better part of the ‘90s living in her car, traveling from peak to peak and waiting on tables while honing her climbing skills. She got her first break in 1998, when Patagonia clothing company took her on as its first female “climbing ambassador.” The following decade saw Davis conquer a string of

difficult ascents, which culminated in her becoming the first woman to free-climb the Salathé Wall of Yosemite’s El Capitan in 2005.

In addition to scaling improbable heights, Davis has taken to BASE jumping and literally flying in a winged bodysuit. “Nowadays I get excited about certain goals, but in some ways, I’m not as attached to the outcome,” she says. “Strangely, it seems to make them easier to complete, and certainly more enjoyable.”

While such extreme sports might be considered peculiar solo endeavors, they’re fueled by a more universal desire: to conquer fear.

“Breakthroughs are very exhilarating, and the few times they happen, it is always very memorable and important,” Davis says. “However, as with everything in life, I

have learned that overcoming fear requires persistence, discipline and long-term intention. Anyone who practices anything diligently will improve at it. Fear is no different.”

Her experiences have made Davis an in-demand speaker in the US and Europe, and she’ll be visiting Japan for the first time this month to give a talk entitled “High Places: Conquering Fear En Route to ‘Impossible’ Dreams.” If her book *High Infatuation: A Climber’s Guide to Love and Gravity* is anything to go by, she should be a thoughtful and candid speaker. Published in 2007, the collection of essays and photos details the way in which climbing has changed Davis’ outlook on life. “Right now, climbing makes me think about purity—climbing purely because I love the act of climbing,” she says.

Speaking of purity, Davis is also a committed vegan and practices yoga on a regular basis. “The mental aspects of yoga resonate the most with me,” she says, “though of course, practicing *asanas* is directly beneficial to climbing, and to health.”

Her visit to Japan is being hosted by Tokyo studio YogaJaya, whose director, Patrick Oancia, was sufficiently inspired by Davis’ story to invite her over. The climber and adventurer will also participate in the studio’s upcoming International Intensive Teacher Training, using her experiences to lecture on the topic of self-inquiry and personal empowerment.

Steph Davis will speak at Content in the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo on July 30. See event listings (learning) for details.

