

Dharmette: Confidence like a Snake

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on June 22, 2016

An image that I'm quite fond of is that of a snake that grows bigger, and as it grows bigger, at some point the snake sheds its old skin and grows a new one.

Sometimes that's how we grow: in the challenges we have, things we need to outgrow, things we need to face and let go of perhaps, and the way we let go. The way we become free of some things is by just growing bigger, and then it just sloughs off. That's nice because then we don't have to be so actively involved with trying to let go.

Sometimes, people are overly concerned with their problems. Certainly there can be problems, but some of the problems we have probably deserve less attention than they are given, and some of the problems we have deserve more attention than they're given. Knowing which direction you should go is part of the wisdom of it all. There are problems that we should acknowledge and recognize, but it's not so important for us to personally be involved in directly fixing them.

Sometimes, it's better just to keep growing, developing and holding the course, and develop oneself to become bigger. And then these things will just slough off on their

own.

One of the important factors that can help us to grow bigger, so things can just kind of fall off, is confidence – to go through our life and our practice with confidence. Confidence is one of the great things that keeps us on course, keeps us going, and keeps us taking the next step and the next breath. In terms of meditation practice, it gets us back on the cushion to practice, gets us to be mindful in our daily life – with the confidence to show up in an honest way, the confidence to show up in an open way, the confidence to be engaged on a path of practice, and to keep walking the path.

That confidence in supporting us to keep walking the path helps us to grow. And as we grow and develop, then some of the problems we have will stop being problems – not because our problems are fixed, but because they've fallen aside. It depends what kind of problems we are talking about. Maybe you have some of your own you can think about. But if you get a flat tire, no amount of mindfulness is going to help. If I'm confident in my practice, and follow the eight-fold path, the tire will take care of itself. That's just magical thinking, right? So some things you do have to take care of.

But if you are really anxious about something, constantly anxious about anything at all, then

sometimes it is useful to address anxiety directly, and sometimes it's best to ignore it – to let it be there, and to try not to let it get in the way. But you keep doing the practice, and as you grow in the practice, then you might find that the anxiety can either fall away, or become less and less of a big deal because it's not so interesting for you anymore. You become bigger than it.

As some of you know, an analogy I like is that of a fly landing on ant. It is a big deal for the ant, but if the same fly lands on the back of an elephant, it's not a big deal for the elephant. So would you rather be an ant or an elephant? Would you rather be psychologically big? While some of the things are still there, you're so much bigger, and it's not really so much of a big deal. You might still have some anxiety, but there's so much space to hold things, so much bigness to support you that the anxiety is not going to get in the way. You're still able to go through your life. But if you're an ant, then anxiety is a big deal, and it's very hard to keep going.

The word 'confidence' in Pali is *saddhā*, which is sometimes also translated as 'faith', or 'trust' or 'conviction.' Different people have different associations or resonances with these different words (faith, trust confidence or conviction), but I like the word 'confidence' a lot because it points to a personal quality – how we are. It's how we relate to what we are doing. If we can have confidence in the value of showing up, of

being present, of being honest, then we can grow bigger pretty fast. It doesn't have to be a twenty-year project. Sometimes it can be in a single day that you can feel stronger, clearer, and calmer. You can feel yourself becoming more able to be honest and expressive of yourself. You can be more willing to show up. *Here I am.*

With confidence in the path and practice, we will grow. And as we grow, things will change. Some things fall away, and some things become less and less significant. When they become less significant, they are no longer obstacles for us. They are just there on the side, like a pesky fly, but they're not going to stop us from doing what we need to do.

So you might want to spend some time considering the role that confidence has for you in your life, and how you can tap into the confidence that you have. Sometimes, people focus on how they don't have confidence, on their lack of confidence. But I would suggest that you have confidence. It may be small. It might not be something that you pay much attention to. You might have blinders on so you don't identify with having it. But certainly you have some confidence.

See if you can find out what you have confidence in, and then use that as a foundation to grow and develop and keep going. Use the confidence you have as food,

as a support and encouragement to keep going, because it's in the going, in the practicing and in the doing that you will become stronger and bigger – step by step.

Those are my thoughts. Does anyone have any questions, comments about the talk, or testimonials of being a really big snake?

Practitioner #1: I recently came back from a retreat-like vacation in a cottage on a river. On the last day we went river rafting. I hadn't done that in a while, and I was in my own boat, which I've never done before on a river. I was very scared at first. I had done rafting a while back but there weren't any extreme rapids. The first one was hard, really hard, and I almost panicked and said, "I can't do this." Then the most amazing shift happened. I just changed my posture a little bit; the boat co-operated; and the next three hours were like a minute. In no time with just a beautiful transparency – what they call a jade river – and I was just part of it. It was transformative. And so your Dharmette is very fitting. The confidence became incredibly embracing and guided me along.

GF: And some of the old skin of fear fell away.

Practitioner #1: Yeah, completely. And my navigation became spot on.

GF: Lovely, thank you.

Practitioner #2: Thank you, I like this word ‘confidence.’ Sometimes I feel like it’s not natural for me to feel confident, and so I’d like to know if it comes with a ‘how to’, aside from shifting your posture?

GF: Yes, sitting up straighter can help. A few things I would say is, as I said earlier, that you might not think of yourself in terms of confidence, but you certainly have some confidence in some things. You probably have confidence when you wake up in the morning that you know how to make yourself breakfast. But you don’t think of confidence as part of that because it’s so simple. Like “Boy, am I so confident because I’m going to make breakfast,” right? But there is a kind of inherent confidence in doing something as simple as that. So I’d encourage you to look at the places where you are already confident in your ability to do things, and appreciate that. You might discover that you have more confidence than you currently realize, and that will feed you.

The other thing is that confidence grows by doing. You don’t become more confident by just sitting around hoping that it will fall from the sky. It comes from action, so you might look for simple actions where you don’t feel like you have much confidence. Choose a situation that is not really a big deal, nothing really challenging – just something a tiny bit challenging, and take small steps to learn to have confidence in that activity, and then the next activity, and then the next activity.

Using the example of going down a river where you

have no confidence that you know how to handle a boat on a river, first go out on a completely serene flat lake with no current. “Oh I can do that.” And then find the slowest, widest piece of a shallow river you could ever find, so that if you fall over, you only fall into four inches of water. “Oh I can do that, I’m confident I can do four inches of water.” And then go where it’s five inches and a bit faster. “Oh I can do that.” The principle being: slowly, to do small things that are doable, and feel the confidence that comes with that. And over time, you can get to the things that are really challenging.

Practitioner #2: Thank you

GF: Great.

Thank you all.