

Dharmette: What is Your Trunk?

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on February 9, 2011

Good morning everyone. The word 'trunk' has interesting multiple meanings. We talk sometimes about the trunk of a person meaning the torso, but there is also the trunk of a tree. The trunk of a tree, especially a big tree, is the solid, strong base that holds all the branches. To be rooted, resting or centered in one's own trunk, is a very interesting idea. If you use the metaphor of a big tree where the branches branch out from the trunk, first you have two or three big branches, and then they branch further and further. The further out you go, the more the branches divide out and become thinner, until they get so thin that they wouldn't even hold up a squirrel, let alone you.

The further out you go, the closer you get to the leaves, and the more easily those small branches and leaves get pushed around by the wind, rain, or anything that comes along. They move back and forth. The leaves in a deciduous tree will eventually fall off anyway, and small branches will also break off easily. But the trunk of this big solid tree doesn't move. No matter how strong the wind is, the trunk stays solid. If someone bumps up against the trunk, the trunk is not going to break. But if

someone bumps up against some of the thin branches, they break off. If you find a squirrel bouncing around on the outer-most branches, the branches dip and move under the weight of the squirrel. The squirrel is always going, bouncing and bouncing along. It's not going to find any real place to rest on these outer branches. But the closer to the trunk the squirrel comes, the more stability and strength it has.

Some of us are living our lives way out on the edge of the branches, and so much so that we don't even know we have a trunk. Part of the task of practice is to find ourselves in our trunk – to find out where the place, values, emotions, and sense of being-ness feel the most stable, rooted, or “at the heart.” That place is where there's confidence and strength, rather than where we're responding and reacting to the world around us – and negotiating, managing, fixing, defending, or building up. To be on the branches is to be responding and reacting. For people on the branches, practice can be very important, but it exhausts them because they are always reacting, responding, and trying to be mindful, compassionate, and not pulled this way and that.

Practice is good anywhere, but if you're on the edge of the branches, you're going to tire yourself out pretty quickly. If you're in your trunk, you're not going to be so reactive and pushed around by all the things around

you. You're not going to be influenced by things as much. There is less that you have to respond to because you haven't reacted.

I think one of the possible tasks of any practitioner is to discover what their trunk is – what's the place inside where they feel some sense of strength, confidence, or foundation – a place of refuge or rest, where they're not so easily swayed or moved by the things around them. They're not at a place where they're looking for approval from other people. In your trunk, it doesn't matter if someone disapproves of you. The trunk has been there for a long time. The weather comes and goes, and it's okay for the trunk. However, when the weather comes and goes for the branches, it's a big deal. In a big snowstorm, the branches break. If you live on the branches, and you measure your life by the most superficial qualities, your life becomes quite fragile.

What do you think is the difference between you living on the branches and you living in your trunk? Do you have an understanding of what that difference is? For each person it's different. I don't want to say there's one trunk that everyone is supposed to find – the same trunk. But what is your trunk? Where is your base, your foundation? Where are you when you're on the branches? Where are you when you're way out on the branches and very fragile, easily tripped up, or caught up, and always having to react, respond, and move?

One of the ways of finding the answers to some of these questions is to do something like meditation. In meditation, we and sit upright, let go in a deep way, and find a deep rest in the physical trunk – the body. In the wonderful statue of the Buddha in meditation, there is a very confident, strong trunk. This is not some kind of wimp. We don't know at all what the Buddha looked like, but the ideal is that the trunk is something solid. So what would it take for you in meditation to assume a physical posture that expresses confidence, rootedness, and presence, and then let go of the things that pull you off this way and that? Let go of the superficial mind that's caught up in things, and find yourself rooted here in the present moment. With that as a reference point, look at your life, and how you live it, the concerns you have, and see if you can identify what it is to be in the branches or way out in the leaves, and what is it to be in your trunk right here.

I want to challenge you further in this kind of investigation. In the whole issue of identity – figuring out who you are in terms of identity, how you're going to represent yourself, how you're going to define yourself – more likely than not, it is out there in the branches. You're not going to find your trunk by assuming or taking on an identity, or saying, "That's who I really am."

So the question is, “What is your trunk?” And over the next months some of you might want to come back here and tell me what you think it is. I would love to hear. So those are my thoughts.