

Dharmette: Feeding and Not Feeding the Troll

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on April 8, 2020

I am in a bit of a silent mood, so what I'd like to do is tell a story. Some of you have heard this story before, but it can be applied in new ways. It's a fable – a myth told in the ancient Buddhist texts. It concerns the great chief god of the heavens, Brahmā – a powerful figure, who has a great, divine, heavenly palace. In the main meeting room, there is a mighty throne that only Brahmā sits on.

One day when Brahmā was out and about in the universe away from home, along comes an ugly, little runt of a troll. This mean-spirited, little troll hops along, dragging its body, and finds its way into the great meeting hall of the palace. He jumps up onto Brahmā's great throne, and sits there looking out across the court. The other gods who are there are quite concerned. They start to get upset because only Brahmā sits in that seat. So they tell the troll to get off the throne, but he doesn't. They start raising their voices, expressing their anger and hostility to this ugly, little runt of a troll. And as they get more and more angry and upset with him, the troll gets bigger, stronger, and less ugly. He is no longer a little runt. The gods of the court are confused by this, so they go out across the universe to find Brahmā to tell him what's going on at home. Brahmā says, "Oh, I understand," and he magically makes his way home, "as quickly as a strong person could flex their arms and snap their fingers."

Brahmā goes to his throne in the meeting hall, and stands in front of this now big, strong, radiant troll. He starts bowing to the troll, offering his respect. He tells the troll, "I hope you're well. I hope you're comfortable up there. It's nice to see you." He bows again, offering his kindness and respect. And as he does so, the troll starts getting smaller, and smaller, and smaller. It keeps getting smaller until finally – poof – it vanishes.

Brahmā then gets up on the throne, and explains to all the gods in his court:

That troll was an anger-eating troll. That's what the troll subsisted on. In fact, he sat on the throne to get you angry. And the more angry you became, the more food he had, and the more he grew. So, he became bigger and stronger. He was feasting on your anger, so of course he wasn't going to get down. He loved his strength, his power, and the majesty of looking out at those angry eyes. It was wonderful. But if you stop feeding him, and offer him kindness and respect, then his sustenance is not provided, and he'll shrink, get small, and – poof – he vanishes.

There is no indication in the story that there was any sympathy or compassion for this troll. It's a fable for us. I don't know if you like trolls. I'm from Norway, where there are lots of trolls – and they're kind of cute. But there are trolls in us. So, which ones do you feed? Do you have an anger troll that gets bigger as you feed it – as you get angry at yourself, angry at your anger, or angry at the world? What are you feeding? What gets bigger?

Do you have a greed troll? Does your greed grow bigger? Does the greed promote more greed, more desire, and more wanting? I've had times in my life where it just seemed like I was a wanting engine. I wanted this, and this, and this. Sometimes I didn't really have an object that I wanted. I just wanted *something*. I just knew that I *wanted*. Desire is sometimes insatiable.

Is there a self-pity troll? Is there an arrogance troll that feeds on arrogance and gets bigger? What do we feed? This idea of what we feed is recognizing that there is a difference between having any of these things – having anger, greed, arrogance, fear – and feeding them. There are fear trolls too. There is a difference between having these emotions come up, and how we feed them.

It's feeding them that is the issue – the way we relate to our emotions and attitudes – what's extra, what we add on. Sometimes what we add is the fuel that feeds and grows the troll, justifies its very existence, insists on being seen, and values its power and strength. Sometimes we feed it by giving in, collapsing to the despair troll.

In the path of mindfulness, everything is to be respected. Everything is allowed to sit on its throne and be respected in that way. It's for us to be willing to meet what arises with humility – with a lack of conceit, demands, hostility, or conflict. In a sense, it is to bow to all things:

Hello, I see you. I know you. I respect your presence right now. It doesn't mean that I agree with you. It doesn't mean I'm fueling or encouraging you. But I offer you my respect – my ability to see again, to look more deeply, to not be in conflict – and to hold you in awareness and see you clearly.

If you do that – if you can offer your trolls caring and respectful attention – not condemning, succumbing, or collapsing to anything, not being hostile, afraid of your fear, or angry at your anger – not being angry at or afraid of your desires. Just look at them. Imagine that you put them on the throne in the center of the palace, and in placing them there, you can leave them alone. Don't get involved. Don't feed them. But look at them carefully and kindly, and then see what happens.

Maybe it's not a troll that will get smaller and smaller, and just disappear. Chances are it's a being that will transform itself into one of the most friendly, loving, and appreciative trolls that you could ever imagine having – kindness, love, care, generosity, peacefulness, patience, mindfulness.

May your respect, kindness, care, and your non-involved, non-reactive, and non-conflicted attention support the profound transformation of what's inside of you, so that the very best of you has a chance to grow, develop, and become part of who you are.

May you be careful that you don't feed the anger troll.

Thank you all for being here. I appreciate it very much.