

Be, See, Free, We (9 of 10) Strength and Confidence

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What all of you cannot see on these Zoom screens is that I'm sitting on what we call a "teaching platform" here at IMC. This teaching platform is maybe 14 inches off the ground. It is made from wood with four wooden legs. It was built by a man named Jim, who was part of our community for many years and has now passed away. One of his gifts to me and to people in our community was that he stuttered periodically when he talked.

This was a gift because he would stop in the most relaxed and open way, as if there was no problem whatsoever, and nothing wrong was happening. So we all learned that there was nothing wrong happening and there was no problem. It was just his way of being in the world, his way of talking. We would all just wait. I don't know if "wait" is even the right word. We would just stay silent and allow for it. Then at some point, he would complete his sentence. His gift was that he seemed very relaxed, and unapologetic. There wasn't anything that needed to be talked about or explained. He was very self-confident, peaceful, and assured, and he stuttered.

The idea is we can allow ourselves to be who we are, with all the different ways that we are. There are many ways that people can get self-conscious and feel apologetic or feel as if there's something wrong with them. Maybe this is not necessary. Over the years one of the signs I've seen in people who mature in Buddhist practice is that they seem to have a remarkable okay-ness and ease with how they are, even when they have qualities that are a little bit unusual and unique to them, which in some places might be called problems. Maybe if you had that condition you would feel self-conscious and trip over yourself. It is kind of a gift to be around someone who doesn't seem to be self-conscious and seems to be at ease.

That's the kind of strength that I want to talk about today. It is not necessarily a strength that looks powerful, but it's a strength that allows us to be ourselves without apology, without comparing ourselves to others, without diminishing ourselves in any way, and without limiting ourselves. There are many ways in which we limit ourselves. I think maybe a good example of this is when someone has practiced a musical instrument for a long time and finally has a chance to perform their music in front of other people. Maybe it's a solo piece, and it's exquisite. When the person is really absorbed in the music, the audience disappears, the room they're in disappears, and it is just the music and them playing the music. It is so exquisite to feel that. The person feels a kind of freedom when they play this way, and so much of the world disappears in a beautiful, wonderful way.

Then somehow in the middle of their music, someone tells them that their fly is down. "Hey, by the way, your fly is down." Now the person is self-conscious, and they're concerned about what people think about them, and they feel they need to be the well-dressed musician who takes care of themselves. All these ideas of self come into play, and now it's hard to be absorbed in the music. The ideas of self have constricted, limited, or tripped up the absorption in their beautiful ability to play music.

I don't know if that's the best example. You can come up with lots of examples of people who are doing something that has freedom in it, and as soon as they start getting self-conscious, trying to define themselves, or trying to prove that they are a certain kind of person, they become limited.

I did that when I was in college. To my surprise, I started doing art in college. I like to say I was tricked into it, but I started doing art, taking drawing and painting classes, and I enjoyed it a lot. Then I remember very well one day when I was riding my bicycle, I said, "Oh, I'm an artist." I defined myself as an artist in a way I hadn't before when I just did art. Amazingly enough, the day I decided I was an artist was the day I stopped doing art.

Something about doing art for the purpose of being an artist – for the sake of the identity – came from a very different place within than just doing it. Doing art came out of an expression of who I was. For me – I'm not saying it's the same for other people – the identity of an artist was limiting. It kind of tripped me up.

In Buddhism, we put a lot of emphasis on not-self. But the emphasis on not-self is not meant to diminish us but to allow more of us to play the music. It is meant to allow us to express ourselves without the limitations of self-definition (when definitions limit us – they don't have to). We may hold on to some particular aspect of ourselves and say, "This is who I really am" in a way that is limiting.

One of the things that we cultivate and develop in Buddhist practice is coming from a place of power, where our strength and confidence well up from the inside. For some people, being powerful in themselves is frightening. They feel that if they stand up and make themselves known and are strong, they will be batted down. Sometimes people have been batted down. People do terrible things to each other. Or they might be afraid of hurting people if they are strong and confident, and they can't do that. Certainly, people hurt each other.

Meditation practice can be a place where we allow our strength and power to be there, not in a way that's egotistical and self-centered, but in a way that is very peaceful. Like my friend Jim who stuttered. He had a certain power of just being alive when he paused as he stuttered. There was ease and relaxation, and also strength.

Now that I'm getting older, when I look back at my life, I see my body changing in a variety of ways. My body is weaker than it used to be. I remember how decades ago, I was stronger in some ways. I didn't know it back then. It was just part of who I was and I was unselfconscious about it. But there was physical strength that I don't have now. I didn't recognize it because it was just part of the territory.

We all have strength. You wouldn't be alive if there wasn't some energy and aliveness coursing through you that holds you up, allows you to breathe, and allows you to just *be*, as you are. I'm confident that, as we get older, weaker, and sicker, and all kinds of things happen, a strength can still exist there – the Dharma strength.

What we're cultivating in the Dharma is partly inner strength, inner confidence, and inner assurance to carry us and let us be so that we can look deeply into the world and have insight into the inconstancy and changing nature of experience. Experiencing inconstancy, change, and impermanence is a whole different game when we do it with stability, strength, and confidence. It's a whole different thing to encounter suffering when we have a sense of well-being, assurance, or confidence.

There is a whole different context for insight – having a deep penetrating perception into the Buddha's teachings on not-self – when that perception is supported by confidence, strength, inner power, ease, and assurance. Then we're not batted around by the idea of not-self. Understanding not-self doesn't feel like a diminishment.

In the particular way that Buddhists understand the self, it is the self that limits us. It is conceit that limits us. It's selfishness that limits us. We need to have the strength to break through that so that the old snakeskin of the *Naga* can fall away.

Finally, I'll end with the word "*Naga*" in Nepali. It can mean a serpent. It also can mean an elephant. An elephant is supposed to be a very big, strong animal in the jungle. The idea here is that a person without attachment becomes like an elephant. In the story, it's not really clear whether it's a serpent, an elephant, or some mythic being, but it's something powerful.

So imagine that a very big fly lands on an ant. That's a big deal for the ant. It's heavy for the ant. The ant certainly notices that it has something bigger than it is riding on its back. It's a problem. If the same fly lands on the back of an elephant, it's no big deal for the elephant. Maybe the elephant recognizes the fly is there, but the elephant doesn't care.

Do you want to go through the world as an ant or do you want to go through the world as an elephant? With mindfulness, as we open to and recognize what's here, we cultivate confidence and strength. This can mean confidence in the Dharma, confidence in the practice, confidence in our ability to practice, confidence in the value and importance of freedom, and confidence that being attached and caught in self is not useful.

As we develop this confidence, in a sense we become like an elephant. We still have flies buzzing around. We still have our fears, our concerns, our selfishness, and all these things. Maybe we stutter, but it's not a big deal. We have learned how to be free of it.

In Buddhism, there is a custom of referring to practitioners practicing together in Sangha as Nagas, or great serpents and dragons. (I don't know if you like to be referred to that way, so if you don't like it, don't listen.) Dear serpents and dragons, may your strength and power support you as you sit and meditate, as you live this day. For those of you on the retreat, the last day can be a day when we feel reassured in a very strong, stable way that just to be alive is enough.
Thank you.