

Binding and Unbinding (4 of 5) Unwholesome and Wholesome Confidence

May 26, 2022

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

bind, unbind, tangle, untangle, let go, attachment, wholesome, not-self, cling, identity, emergent, conceit, strength, precepts, praise, greed, preoccupation, Five Strengths, arrogance, negative conceit, self-diminishment, emergent, emerge

Gil Fronsdal

The theme this week is binding and unbinding or being tangled and untangled. There are qualities of our inner life – qualities of being – that can look like each other, be related or similar, but are on either side of a divide. Sometimes these two are confused. In letting go of how we get caught and entangled in attachments, we might also let go of the wholesome because it looks similar. But we want to keep the wholesome – that which is unbinding, that which helps us become untangled.

Conceit is one side of that divide. Buddhism puts a tremendous emphasis on freedom from conceit. Conceit is an attachment, an entanglement. The teaching is to realize not-self – to realize that the many things we take to be me, myself, and mine are not really that way. They are not who we are. And so we can let go of our entanglement with the things we appropriate for our self-identity. We can let go of the way we cling to identity and ideas.

These two ideas of not-self and overcoming conceit can lend themselves to the idea that you are not supposed to be strong or confident, like you are really here. That you should probably sit in the back of the room or slump on the couch, so you are not asserting yourself.

But Buddhist practice is meant to free the emergent qualities of strength, the emergent qualities of life that have nothing to do with attachment. These emergent qualities come from the release of deeper responses, attitudes, feelings, and motivations for the world we live in. One of these can be a sense of confidence.

There can be strong confidence in the Dharma, the practice, and ourselves – that we have learned how to navigate the world wisely. I would like to suggest that we can have confidence in not breaking the precepts. This may not be easy to do.

Hopefully, all of you are confident that you will not act on any impulse to kill another human being. You have confidence that this is not what you are going to do. You are not going to steal from someone. Hopefully, you are not going to cause harm through sexual misconduct. One explanation for sexual misconduct is that people start making exceptions. And hopefully, you do not lie or engage in intoxication.

You have confidence in your precepts. You can have confidence that you will not intentionally harm anyone. You will restrain yourself if necessary. You have confidence in your ability to not make things worse. This is a powerful thing. Whatever situation you are in, do not make it worse. You might not know what to do. It may be okay not to know, but do not make the situation worse. Hold your tongue. Do not act if you think it will make the situation worse. Have confidence that you know how to do that. Have confidence in your practice – that you can show up, be mindful, and find your way with what is going on.

This confidence then feeds a kind of inner strength. Buddhist practice makes us stronger human beings. We are cultivating and developing spiritual and psychological muscles – muscles of mindfulness, concentration, focus, equanimity, non-reactivity, understanding, wisdom, and discernment. These qualities become strong.

This strength can feel embodied, so when we show up someplace, we do not show up with any hesitation. We do not show up in any way that diminishes ourselves. We do not assert ourselves, but we also do not diminish ourselves. We can have confidence in being fully present at the midpoint between pulling away and asserting ourselves. Full confidence in being present, as if we count – as if we belong here.

So, to navigate between conceit and confidence, and to not confuse the two. Conceit, in Buddhist teachings, is said to be a product of the imagination. Its purpose is to advertise oneself, like holding a banner: “Look at me. I’m so great.” Along with conceit, there can be greed – greed for *my* way, what *I* want, and who *I* want to be. Conceit thrives with praise. Searching for praise is one of the functions of conceit. It is a contraction. To have conceit is a form of irritation for the heart.

Oddly enough, many English-speaking people, including Buddhists, associate the word conceit with arrogance. Conceit is also associated with a certain kind of preoccupation with self – a contraction and tightness around self that we would call a negative conceit. It is an attachment to thinking of ourselves as less valuable than others. It is just as much of a conceit as thinking that we are better than others. It still involves the self and comparisons.

Practice is supposed to free us from establishing an identity based on comparing ourselves to others, either as being better or worse. What can we do instead of comparing ourselves? We learn to just be. We learn to be without comparisons. We learn to be without measuring ourselves against other people or standards of any kind.

We learn in meditation to let go. To do this, there are some standards we might have to deal with, such as the precepts. There are standards for making amends for some of the harm we have done in the world. There are standards for learning how to speak honestly, truthfully, and kindly. We might have to clean up our act to some degree so we can really let go and trust this moment, trust ourselves. Then an unarrogant, unconceited sense of strength, presence, confidence, and aliveness can emerge.

We do things then without attachment or clinging to anything but also wholeheartedly. We are not held back by attachments, complacency, resistance, or ideas that it is too hard. There is freedom in what we do. We do it wholeheartedly, given the conditions of our mind and body. We act without complaint. There is just, “This is what I’m doing in whatever way I can.”

So, to have confidence and strength as part of Dharma practice. Our mindfulness tradition talks about the Five Strengths (powers). They are the powers of confidence, engagement, mindfulness, *samādhi*, and wisdom (discernment). How can these powers emerge and flow through us without conceit? I would like to propose that conceit is always a reactive response to the world, but Dharma confidence is not reacting to anything. It is an emergent quality – a quality that emerges through our freedom, a quality we allow.

For the next twenty-four hours, you might explore this topic of conceit and confidence. Look at the divide between these two ways of being in the world. One way is to be entangled in self concerns – what people think of us, how we want people to think of us, how we measure ourselves. We are entangled and caught in conceit – even arrogance or self-diminishment. The other way is to be in the world with confidence and strength.

Act in ways that express whatever confidence or innate strength you may have. When you are sitting in a chair, sit in a way that allows for a posture of confidence as well as rest. Whatever you are doing – cooking, washing the dishes – do it in a way that allows something to emerge inside – to be expressed – that is strength and confidence, without conceit.

As confidence and strength emerge, it might highlight where the conceit is operating. If you start seeing it, do not despair. Seeing conceit is one of the great benefits of mindfulness practice. If you see it clearly, there is hope for it not to interfere with your life – not to bind and keep you entangled. Thank you. I hope this exploration is nice for you.