

# Ten Reflections (6 of 10) Dignity

April 29, 2024

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS** dignifier, value, importance, mirroring, autonomous, parenting, self-worth, self-importance, respect, internalize, opinions, snake skin, conceit, overvaluing, diminishing, fragment, cost, middle way, inhabit, overbearing, underbearing, meaning, purpose, agency, autonomy, identity

**Gil Fronsdal**

Today we're halfway through the 10 reflections that are central to offering spiritual care. I like to think that spiritual care is as much for oneself as for others. Wishing ourselves well and caring for ourselves in a deep way allows us to care for others.

One of the phenomenally important roles of people who offer spiritual care to others – chaplains, clergy, monastics, and Buddhist teachers – is to convey to others their dignity, value, and importance. What a great role it is to be a dignifier of other people. I think of this as an affirmation and a deep appreciation of others, and a recognition of what is wonderful about others.

Not enough people have been seen in valuable ways with respect and care. As we grow up, the mirroring of people who respect us and care for us is invaluable. Sometimes people love us, or they say or think they love us, but the love is so entangled with control, with wanting us to be a certain way, or with making us safe and protecting us, that there's no room for us to stand on our own two feet and be fully and clearly ourselves. Excessive parenting sometimes gets in the way of giving room for us to be recognized and seen as autonomous, as having agency.

We can dignify others better if we have a sense of our own dignity. So, dignity is the sixth of the ten reflections. Maybe you prefer a different word for dignity. It could be “worth,” “self-worth,” “self-importance”, or “respect.” Maybe there are other synonyms for this territory. I like the word “respect” a lot – having a deep respect for ourselves. I often say that I like the word “respect” because its Latin root means “to see again” – to value others and ourselves enough to take a second look. We make space to really get to know ourselves, other people, and the situation. We respect them, so let's get to know them more.

Respect is not a diminishment of ourselves. It's not submitting ourselves or lowering ourselves in order to hold someone else up. We offer others respect with all our dignity, respect, value, and importance. Then maybe in kind of an American way, we see each other as equals, and we meet as equals.

One of the profound ways in which I was trained in Zen practice is that the relationship between a teacher and a student was supposed to grow into a time that, when they met, it was the meeting of Buddha and Buddha. Only in the meeting of a Buddha and a Buddha does the practice come to fulfillment. The mutual respect, dignity, and value that was built into cultivating the Zen student-teacher relationship was very impactful for me. The idea is that we meet with that kind of care, love, and respect as if we were Buddhas meeting each other.

In the reflection about respect, dignity, and self-valuing, it might be useful to begin to understand all the ways in which we do the opposite and do not maintain our dignity, but give it up – all the ways we do not respect ourselves and there's actually disrespect. This includes all the ways we feel unworthy.

Some of that is learned from the world around us. We internalize people's projections, opinions, and ideas that we are unimportant, or that we have to be different. Sometimes growing into our dignity is like a snake shedding its skin. We have to shed all these inherited views and opinions that we received from

family, religion, and society so that we can take a stand and take our seats in a full, clear, and dignified way.

Also, we have to understand the difference between dignity and conceit. Conceit is a way of giving ourselves over-importance and asserting ourselves. "It has to be my way. I have to be the one who has my 15 minutes of fame." We project ourselves into the world because we want to be seen, held up, and praised in a certain way. So both diminishing ourselves and overvaluing ourselves should be understood deeply and clearly.

Part of the value of mindfulness practice is that, as we learn to stay in the present moment and see the operating systems that are operating for us, not only do we see them, but more importantly, we also see their cost. We see how life gets drained from us when we diminish ourselves. We see how we fragment ourselves and stress ourselves through conceit and overdoing it. We lose part of ourselves.

As we begin to understand the problems of the different forms of the absence of dignity, then we may begin to understand something about the middle way. There can be a kind of dignity and respect and value that allows us to really inhabit ourselves, to really be here fully and clearly in a simple, peaceful way, without anxiety, fear, and self-assertion, and without diminishing ourselves or feeling unworthy. No one has to be afraid of us.

I've met people who conventionally seem somewhat meek, quiet, and gentle. They would be the last people I would imagine thinking they were going to be overpowering for others. But somehow they spent their lives being concerned that they were going to do that very thing: overpower, be too strong, and too much for people. I don't know what the psychological dynamics of that combination are.

I think ideally we want to have a society of strong people. Some of us could do well to develop a sense of strength, to grow up in a certain way. We don't want to diminish ourselves for people who are gentle or meek, but find a way to support them, see them with dignity, and help them grow so they also can be strong.

If we feel that we are somehow too much for people, maybe that's a time for a lot of attention and study. What's really going on there? Maybe sometimes it's useful to recruit friends and family to get feedback. Ask: "How does this work for me? Am I too much?" Sometimes we are. Maybe we have something to learn. Sometimes we're not, and we have something else to learn. But we need to learn the impact we have on other people when we navigate in the world. We need to be mirrored by other people to understand who we are and how we operate so that we can find that middle way of dignity – the middle way where we can stand upright and strong without assertion, without being overbearing, and without being underbearing.

The idea of dignity grows out of the earlier reflections. When we have a sense of meaning and purpose, when we have agency and we can act on it, when we have a sense of autonomy and a strong sense of identity and we know who we are, all these build on each other and support each other. Then when we feel our dignity, it arises out of knowing ourselves well. It arises out of knowing the purpose and value in our life, knowing what's most important.

From a Buddhist point of view, we develop our dignity not because we're inherently human – as if the inherent humanity of everyone is worthy of our respect and reverence (which it might be. I don't want to say it's not. But that's not the Buddha's orientation.) I think the Buddha's orientation is that our dignity is something that we live. It's how we live in the world, how we speak, how we act, even how we think.

This is why the earlier reflections are so important. We want to reflect: what is a meaningful way to live? What's a meaningful purpose in life? What is our ability to act and to do, rather than sitting back and resting in some kind of inherent goodness? How can we discover a healthy autonomy that allows us to grow into a dignified sense of humanity? That sense of humanity grows as we learn that who we are has a lot to do with how we act and how we live our lives. So we try to live our lives with freedom generosity, love, compassion, and care. This begins to create a fuller place here on this planet.

I hope that these words make sense and are relevant to you. If it didn't quite work for you, I hope at least that these ideas about dignity and value are a catalyst for you to reflect deeply on how they work for you. How can you live with a healthy kind of self-importance? And how do you avoid unhealthy forms of self-importance? How can you tap into a healthy sense of self-respect in order to support the creation of a better world for all of us, starting with the people near us? If I was off track, it's your task, if you'd like, to do a course correction and find how it works most valuably for you. Hopefully, in the process of finding that for yourself, you'll have some wonderful conversations with friends and family around the topic of dignity, respect, and self-importance. Thank you. I look forward to continuing this series tomorrow.