

Dharmette: How Do You Carry Yourself?

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on February 29, 2012

An area of exploration for self-understanding is how one carries oneself in the world. With what attitude do you hold yourself? What image do you have of yourself? What sense do you have of who you are and how you are in the world?

Everyone has some way, some approach for how to be – some attitude of who they are and how they are in relationship to what's around. What is yours? There are different options.

Actually, that sense of self and of how to carry oneself is quite fluid and changeable. It's not fixed in a particular way. I've written a story about this. If you can, imagine a big fat fly landing on the back of an ant. It's a big deal for the ant, I think. But if the same fly lands on an elephant, the elephant probably doesn't even notice. It's not a big deal for the elephant. Even if the elephant notices the fly on its back, it probably doesn't matter.

When you carry yourself as you walk around in your life, you probably have all kinds of problems, troubles, challenges, and difficulties to address. Some are completely mundane and ordinary. The car needs an oil change; the tire is flat. Some are not ordinary. You are diagnosed with a serious illness, or someone in your family is dying. How do you carry yourself with that? Do you carry yourself more as an ant, or more as an elephant? Do you take on these difficulties as if they are a huge burden on your shoulders? Or do you take them on as serious, but because you're so big, you address them and deal with them?

Another image would be that some people approach life more as a deer, but others as a lion. I talked to someone recently who said their profession is about protecting people from dangers, so it is necessary to be proactive – to be looking for and aware of the dangers. The whole workday is taken up with thinking ahead of all the dangers that might come along, figuring them out, preparing for them, and preventing them. Whenever they're at work, the world is filled with dangers and fear is a regular emotion. Rather than saying, "Here's how you can live without fear," I suggested that with fear and danger as part of their work, they might approach their work as if they were a lion, rather than approaching it as a deer. The lion also has to deal with dangers, but how does a lion deal with dangers compared to a deer? The deer is trapped in the headlights and looks skittish.

How are you with the dangers in your life, in your world? Are you more like a deer, or more like a lion? Do you have confidence in your caution and in your engagement? How do you approach your life? How do you carry yourself? Sometimes the focus is so much on the difficulties that there's no sense of your contribution of how to be with the difficulty, how to hold yourself, how to carry yourself. Maybe the difficulty is not going to get any easier, but if you're a lion, you might be more at ease, than if you're a frightened little mouse in the corner.

Another way of understanding or carrying yourself is as being solid, or soft. Some sense of solidity may be useful, but the sense of solidity could also make you fragile. A sense of being soft may be useful if someone says or does something, and you just flow with it. Or the sense of softness might mean you're a pushover. How do you carry yourself when you walk into a new situation? Are you hard? Are you soft?

Sometimes you carry yourself with no image of yourself at all, no concern of self – there's an emptiness or transparency of self. Someone may say or do something. Problems may occur, such as a flat tire, or someone saying they don't like you – and it goes right through you, like the wind going through an open window.

Sometimes you're not so empty and transparent. It's clear that in certain situations who you are has a bearing, and you have to take that into account. For example, in our society it's not useful that a man, feeling quite empty, like he has no identity or is free of identity, and feels transparent, liberated, beautifully free – and then he walks into the women's bathroom. He might think, "It's all empty, who cares? I have no identity – I haven't got the identity thing going." That doesn't make sense when it's time to go to the bathroom. He should be clear about identity when going to the bathroom. When he comes out of the bathroom, maybe he doesn't need to be as concerned about men or women. I can be empty that way sometimes.

How do you carry yourself? What's the image? What's the idea you're operating on? You're almost always

operating on some idea. How do you carry yourself? Ask the question: "How am I carrying myself in this situation?" If it's been unexamined and you're on automatic pilot, stop and look: "How am I carrying myself in this situation? Are there alternative ways? Can I enter this more like a lion? Or maybe now is it useful to be more like a mouse?" Maybe I want to be inconspicuous. There are times for being a fly or an ant that no one notices – quiet, off in a corner.

At other times you want to be someone who's very much noticed. You're a parent, and your kids are playing with matches in the living room. You want them to notice you – you don't want them to hardly notice you're there. You don't want to be quiet and inconspicuous. You want to be conspicuous! In another situation, you are at the funeral of a friend. It's not the time to stand out and be conspicuous, or make sure everyone notices you. In that situation, it's inappropriate. But with your kids at home with the matches, it's appropriate to approach them in a conspicuous way.

What's the approach? How are you carrying yourself? That is the question. I say this carefully because it's different from asking about the sense of self, the self-image, and the self-identity you have. Carrying yourself is broader. Carrying yourself with certain attitudes and approaches might even be independent from the self-image or self-identity you have. How do we carry ourselves?

Then, while it is very important to ask the question of how you carry yourself, I think you can make the investigation richer by asking another question: "How do other people see you carrying yourself? How do other people see you?" The self-image you have and how other people see you can be very different. You might think you're fine the way you are, but other people may experience you as a bull in a china shop, and you don't understand why they are standing back. Or you may feel relaxed, calm, and centered, but other people feel like you're timid, fragile, and have to be taken care of.

The disparity between how we see ourselves, how we carry ourselves, and how that is seen or experienced by other people is interesting. Although it is sometimes harder to be mindful of how other people see us, or to see the impact we have on others, for wise living I think it's useful to take that into account. Given how I carry myself, how is that perceived and responded to by others?

My hope of course is that at the right time and place, you are a lion – and at other times and places you are not there.

Thank you.