

Contentment

June 10, 2013

The principle of contentment with whatever you have is so important that the Buddha mentioned it three times when he described the four customs of the noble ones. Three of the customs are contentment with whatever food you have, contentment with whatever clothing you have, and contentment with whatever shelter you have.

It's important to keep this in mind. Ajaan Suwat said this was one of Ajaan Mun's favorite Dhamma topics—the customs of the noble ones—partly in response to people who kept accusing him of not following Thai and Laotian customs. Going out living in the forest and eating only one meal a day, not going to bless houses: These were not the sorts of things that monks were ordinarily doing in that time.

It's easy enough when we look at the customs of other cultures and see that they're strange. We have to remember that the customs of the noble ones go against our own culture as well. And contentment is one of the big things that really separates the customs of the noble ones from American and Western culture in general right now. Everyone is being trained not to be content, to want things just like this or just like that, faster, faster, faster: to keep the economy going, to keep—I don't know—to keep up appearances. So it's important to remember that the practice of the Dhamma really breaks with that idea. You learn to be content with what you've got. Try to keep things simple—because the simpler your surroundings, the easier it is to practice.

When you're not getting happiness from your surroundings, when things outside are not pleasing, they help to force the issue: There's no pleasure out there? Well, look inside for your happiness. This is where the fourth custom comes in: that you take delight in developing and delight in abandoning—i.e., developing skillful qualities and abandoning unskillful ones. The delight reminds us that we're not being stoic just to be stoic. We want to enjoy looking for happiness inside, and to enjoy being independent from things outside.

This applies not only to things, but also to relationships. We're constantly looking for a good relationship with this or that person. We're moving our focus in the direction where it shouldn't be going; it should be coming back in, because relationships, like things, end. And just as with things, our culture has a lot of pressure to go for relationships. We're not doing our duty as members of our culture if we're not looking for a relationship, and we don't look good in the eyes of other people. If we can enjoy not having to look good in their eyes or to meet with their approval, then we're that much closer to freedom.

If you're really serious about practicing the Dhamma, you've got to say, "Whatever you can do to simplify your life, you do that. Whatever you can do to simplify your surroundings, you do that." And when things outside are not happy, not quite what you want them to be, you turn around and look for your pleasure in developing skillful qualities and abandoning unskillful ones.

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about the satisfaction that comes from seeing a defilement, even if it's just a little defilement falling off—like just a little piece of bark falling off a tree. You've got to learn how to take satisfaction in that kind of accomplishment. That's where we look for our pleasure.

Notice, the Buddha doesn't say, "Be content with what skillful qualities you have," or "Be content with what unskillful qualities you have." In fact, he said that he reached awakening precisely because he didn't let himself rest content with whatever skillful qualities he had developed—until he reached the point where there was nothing more to develop.

So he's not teaching radical acceptance. He's teaching us to learn how to focus our attention where it really matters, where it really will make a difference. When you think about relationships, think about the comment he made one time that it's hard to meet anyone who has never been your mother or your father or your brother or your sister or your son or your daughter. Our relationships have been shuffling around so much that we've lost track of how many cards there are and how many different hands we've played.

He added that just that thought should be enough to make you want to go for release instead.

Ajaan Fuang made a similar comment: If there's a pleasure you really hanker after, it's a sign that you had it in a previous lifetime. And you miss it. That too, he said, should make you want to go for release, because you realize that if you get the pleasure again, you're going to lose it again. You're going to miss it again. You're going to hanker for it again—and it's never-ending. There is no satisfaction in things; there is no satisfaction in relationships. Even really good relationships end. And when they end, they can be devastating. That's why we turn and look inside; this is where we place all our efforts to change things.

Change your mind. Change your attitudes. Develop the skills inside that make it satisfying to change your mind, to change your attitudes. That's where we should focus our attention. That's the culture of the noble ones. Just as Ajaan Mun faced a lot of pressure to make his practice more like standard Thai or Laotian practice, we get a lot of pressure to make the Dhamma more American. What it seems to come down to is simply that it'll sell better, but we're not here to sell the Dhamma. We're here to practice the Dhamma. Ajaan Suwat once said, "We're not here to get other people; we're here to get ourselves. And if other people see what we're doing, like what we're doing, and they want to join in, that's fine." But the primary point has to be that we're practicing. We're taking delight in developing skillful qualities and taking delight in abandoning unskillful ones.

That's where you want to learn to be a connoisseur, to have high standards as to what you will and won't accept. As for things outside, learn to be grateful for whatever you do get. Look around yourself here at the monastery. Everything here comes from someone's generosity. Nobody was forced to give anything. Nobody was giving anything out of a sense of obligation. They gave out of the goodness of their hearts. So we should learn to be grateful for everything that comes our way and learn how to express that gratitude by delighting in developing skillful qualities and delighting in abandoning unskillful ones.

Take this principle of contentment to heart. It's not just words; it's the way we live. And if it's not the way we're living, it's the way we should be living. As the Buddha once said, it's one of the principles that determines when a particular practice or a particular attitude in the mind is or is not in line with the Dhamma: Does it lead to contentment, or does it lead to discontent? The Buddha himself said that discontent with regard to skillful qualities is an important principle. In fact, it was one of the principles that led to his own awakening. But as for contentment with material things, that's something you've really got to develop, for only then will your practice be in line with the Dhamma.

So be clear as to where your contentment should be focused and where your discontent should be focused. If you see that you're still engaging in unskillful thoughts or you're still causing stress in one way or another to your own mind, that's an area where you should not be content. You want to figure out what you're doing wrong and how you can change the situation.

As for material things, we've got more than enough here. Every time you use anything, remember you're using someone else's generosity, so you want to use it frugally and well. Use it with a sense of appreciation for its purpose in training your mind, because that's why they gave it: so that it would be used in the practice of training the mind. Even when you're outside of the monastery—where basically, business as usual is business as usual, and not everything that comes your way is an act of generosity—be sensitive to when it is. Have a sense of appreciation. And constantly be on the lookout for ways in which you can be countercultural. In other words, you can embody the culture of the noble ones even as you're living in a very antagonistic culture—one that's trying to pull you away in all sorts of other directions, making you discontented with material things, and contented with whatever's arising in your mind.

In some ways, this makes you an outsider, but outsiders are in a good position. They're not automatically sucked into all the craziness that you can find in every society. There's a strength that comes with being an outsider. If your situation has to be a particular way—it has to be like this, has to be like that—you're a hothouse creature. The temperature has to be just right; the humidity has to be just right. The fertilizer, the sunlight, everything has to

be very carefully controlled or otherwise you'll die. That's not a strong plant. The strong plants are the ones that can live in any situation. As a practitioner, you want to try to make yourself strong in just that same way, willing and able to thrive in any situation. If you're responsible for having influence on the situation, do what you can to keep it simple so that you can maintain your focus.

Here at Wat Metta, we're part of the forest tradition, but physically we're widely separated from where most of the tradition is being practiced in Thailand. It's by trying to maintain the culture of the noble ones that we maintain a sense of closeness to the rest of the tradition. The same holds true when you leave the monastery. Try to maintain these attitudes of contentment—with food, clothing, shelter—and find your delight not in having nice food, clothing, or shelter, but in noticing when you can develop skillful qualities in the mind and when you can abandon unskillful ones. That's how you stay close.