

## *Contentment*

*October 26, 2005*

We're following a path, but it doesn't go anywhere physically. It's a path in the mind. The premise is that it starts out where we don't want to be in the mind, and when we're done, we'll be there, in the same place, but it'll be a different mind.

There's something in human nature that doesn't like that idea. We'd like to be already where the mind wants to be. The idea that we have to strive, we have to make an effort, goes against our defilements. It's amazing, when you look at 2,500 years of Buddhist history, how often people have tried to deny the idea of a path—both people who reject the Buddha's teachings entirely, and those who say they're Buddhist but keep on trying to find some way around the path. All you have to do is accept things as they are, they say, and you'll be fine.

But as Ajaan Chah once noted, that's the equanimity of a water buffalo. Water buffaloes are not smart. They're not wise. There are things that you learn how to accept to be content with, but there are a lot of things the Buddha said you cannot be content with, because there's suffering in the mind. No matter how many conceptual edifices you build up, if suffering is still there, you haven't solved the problem—because the Buddha said that there is the possibility of no more suffering. When he says he teaches suffering and the end of suffering, do you really believe in him? Some people say there's a wisdom in learning how to accept the fact that, well, suffering is part of being a human being, this is what we've got to learn how to put up with. But that's not the vision the Buddha offers.

If the world as we know it were all that there is, then there would be some wisdom in learning to accept it. But the Buddha said it's not. There is another possibility. Think of the young Prince Siddhartha. Everything was easy for him. He was young, good looking, he had a whole troupe of dancing maidens. He had three palaces, one each for the different seasons of the year. He was in line for the throne. And yet he still wasn't satisfied, not because he wanted more wealth, but because he realized that wealth doesn't answer the question of this hunger in the human heart. As his friends and his father's advisors all said, "Look, this is as good as it gets. Learn to accept it." But the young Prince said No, there must be something more noble to search for.

So that's the story of the next six years of his life: a search. It involved all kinds of blind alleys, a lot of effort, and a lot of hardship. Yet he finally found the path. He succeeded because he had determination that he wasn't just going to accept things as they are, particularly not to accept the suffering of the mind. Part of life

is learning to accept external conditions as they are. You've got to put up with all kinds of people, all kinds of problems, lacking this, lacking that. That's an area where the Buddha said you get over the defilements of the mind through learning tolerance, learning contentment, learning equanimity. When it's hot, you put up with the heat. When it's cold, you put up with the cold. Whatever food clothing shelter you get, you learn to be content with that.

But in terms of the mind, he said, you *don't* tolerate unskillful thoughts. When they come up in the mind, you've got to find some way to get around them. Anything in the mind that causes suffering within, you've got to work on it. And even though the end of the path is to put an end to desire, you have to learn how to use your desire for freedom from suffering. You can't just deny your desire, because if you do, it goes underground. You can't deny your suffering, because you start blinding yourself to what's actually happening, and you're also cutting off all possibility of finding something better.

So it's important that you learn this distinction between external contentment and internal discontent. Being content with external things is a wise part of the practice. Not tolerating unskillful mental states is also a wise part of the practice, because it can make a real difference in what you do and what you find as a result of what you do.

So this is where you focus your energy. Look at the mind. What is the mind doing that's causing suffering? What could it do to cause *less* suffering? To see this clearly, you've got to get the mind very, very still. And whatever way you get the mind to settle down in the present moment clearly, with mindfulness and alertness, try to develop those skills within the mind, develop those states within the mind. And keep at it. As Ajaan Fuang once said, if you want to be good at the meditation, you've got to be crazy about the meditation. It has to be something that really intrigues you, captures your imagination, so that the mind in all its spare moments gravitates to the breath, to whatever your meditation object is.

Once you get the mind into this kind of direction, then you begin to see a lot more clearly where the defilements of the mind are. Most people just wander around aimlessly, saying, "I don't have any defilements. The mind just goes with the natural flow." Because as long as you're not set on a particular direction, you have no left or right, or forward or backwards. Everything seems to be forward, simply because you're facing in that direction. It's like swirling around in the whirlpools of a pond. You don't go anywhere. You have no sense of forward or backward because you don't have any particular goal in mind. But once you have a goal in mind, all of a sudden there is a left and a right, an up and a down, a forward and back. That's when you begin to see how the mind wanders off and creates

suffering. You'll encounter some states of mind that get in the way of where you're going, whereas other states of the mind help keep you on the path. Once you have that sense of direction, the internal path becomes a lot clearer. That's where you have to be very, very scrupulous, and not allow the states that pull you back to take over.

There's one other element, though, that the Buddha said not to tolerate, and that's if you find yourself hanging out with people who pull you off the path. You don't want to hang out in that kind of fellowship or companionship at all. You need to have a strong sense that the state of your mind is very precious. Lack of food, lack of clothing, lack of shelter don't pull you off the path. But wrong views do pull you off the path, and it's so easy to pick up wrong views from other people. So that's one area in the external world you have to be very, very careful about—the people you associate with.

Otherwise, the main issues are inside. Make sure you have a strong sense of direction. And as the image in the texts says, be like a man whose head or turban is on fire: You do everything you can to put out the fire. You don't just wait around and learn how to love the fire or develop a nice equanimous attitude toward the fire, because it's going to burn your head.

So be selective in your contentment. Remember: The Buddha's teaching is not a teaching of zero intolerance. Some things you tolerate; other things you don't. And as with every aspect of the path, the question is: When is it skillful to tolerate something and when is it not? That's a question of skill, and that should be uppermost in every consideration.