

Noble Contentment, Noble Discontent

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There's a passage where the Buddha extolls contentment as one of the basic values of the Dhamma practice. But then there's another one where he says it was because he didn't allow himself to stay content with his skillful qualities that he was able to attain awakening. This means we have to figure out: Where does contentment apply, and where does it not?

It applies basically to your physical surroundings—the things you have and use. When the Buddha talks about being content with whatever clothing you have, whatever food you have, whatever shelter you have, these are some of the customs of the noble ones. Being content doesn't mean you don't take care of these things or improve them. There are lots of instructions about how, when you get a hole in your robes, you have to mend it. When your shelter is in danger, when the roof is leaking and termites are invading, you have to protect it. So this isn't a lazy kind of contentment. You accept what you've got, but then you do your best to make the most of it. You look after it well.

It's that element of wanting to make the most of what you've got: That's where the discontent comes in. In other words, you figure: "Is there something more I can do with what I've got? I'll try." You accept where you are, but you also accept the fact that where you are has some potential for growing. That's the fourth of the customs of the noble ones: You take joy in developing and you take joy in abandoning. That applies directly to the mind. You take joy in developing good qualities and abandoning unskillful qualities. Whatever helps you in that direction is part of the practice, too.

So you don't just sit here with whatever comes up, allowing yourself to be assailed by whatever. If there's something you can do to direct the mind in a skillful direction to get it on the path, that's what you do. For instance, with the breath: When the breath is not going well, when it feels uncomfortable, laborious, strained, you watch it for a while, but not so that you just sit with it. You watch it so that you can try to figure it out and then improve it. "What is it about the breath that's uncomfortable? *Why* is it uncomfortable? Is it the way I'm holding my body? Is it the way I'm focused on the breath?"

Some people, when they decide to concentrate on the breath, clamp down on all the energy in the body, and of course that's going to be uncomfortable. You have to think about opening things up, letting the energy come in from all directions and extend out in all directions. You're not here to clamp down or to

grab hold of the breath. You're just to touch the breath and maintain contact with the breath. Think of it that way.

This is one of the areas where you're encouraged to develop, as much as you can, the conditions for allowing the mind to settle down so that it does have a good, solid place to stay. Then you apply the same principles to the mind. What in the mind can you change? What can you not change yet? Any unskillful qualities that come up in the mind, you don't simply accept the fact: "Oh yeah, there's a lot of greed. There's a lot of aversion. There's a lot of lust. There's a lot of fear, jealousy"—whatever. You don't deny the fact that they're there, but you don't just stay there, either. You accept it as your starting point. You also accept the fact that you can develop the mind; you can change the mind.

This is what the Buddha's teachings on karma are all about. We tend to miss this because we misunderstand karma. We think it's all about what you did in the past. But for the Buddha, the important karma is what you're doing right now—what you do with the raw material of the present moment, how you shape it. Given that you're shaping it all the time, you might as well shape it in a good direction.

This is what it means to be discontented with skillful qualities: not that you're always rushing to get to the next step, but realizing there's area for the mind to develop. You take what you've got and you make the most of it. That's where the contentment comes in. "I see these are all the raw materials I've got. Well, let's see what I can make with them."

It's like all those software designers who come from India. They say that back in the past decades, the computers in India were really low-powered. To develop good software, the designers were forced to figure out the most efficient way of writing code. As a result, they became really expert. They took the limitations and used them to their advantage. In the same way, if you find you've got limitations in your practice, see what you can do to use them to your advantage—what lessons you can learn from them, how you make the most of what you've got. You accept what you've got, but you also accept that it has growth potential. And you want it to go in the right direction.

After all, this is a path we're on. If the path didn't go anywhere, the Buddha would have called it the noble eightfold path. But it's a path. Paths have starting points and they have ending points. Your starting point is where you are right now. And you're headed in a direction: You want to be headed to freedom. That's what the substance, what the essence of the teaching is all about. We're going someplace. You start where you are, look at what you've got, and then you figure out, "How can I make the most of this?"

As with Ajaan Lee and Method 2: He had gone deep into the forest for a rains retreat. He'd walked three days into the place where he planned to spend the rains. Soon after he got there, he had a heart attack. There was no medicine. The food available was actually bad for his heart. It was mainly hill tribes' food, and they ate a lot of bamboo shoots. And one of the things I learned in Thailand is that if you have heart disease, stay away from bamboo shoots. But that was all he had, so what was he going to do? He had his breath. So he worked with that, figuring out how to breathe in a way that would give strength back to his body, mend his heart, and mend all the damage that had been done by the heart attack. At the end of the rains retreat, he was able to walk out.

So he faced the fact that he had a lot of limitations, but he made the most of what offered the most potential for growth. That's an attitude you have to take toward everything in life. Whether it's school, your work, or whatever you do, you have to accept what limitations you have and then recognize where your potential strengths are, what has the most growth potential, given the situation you're in right now, and you work on that. You don't just sit there and say, "Well, I'll just be content with the way things are." That's like a farmer lying out in his field, saying, "I'm content with the fact that my field is growing weeds." If that's the farmer's attitude, he doesn't get to eat, his family doesn't get to eat, and nobody else gets the food. Everybody dies.

So contentment means accepting where you are, but for the purpose of the practice, you have to be motivated by a certain discontent. You realize that there is suffering, but you also realize there's something you can do about it. You gather together all the strengths you have and you work on those. You find that, as you develop those strengths, others come along.

There will, of course, be obstacles in the path, but you don't want them to discourage you. There was a story I read one time of a man studying with a Zen teacher in the Midwest. He had decided he wanted to come out to Hollywood and try his luck. I've forgotten whether he was a screenwriter or what. So he went to say goodbye to his teacher, and his teacher said, "What if you go out there and they knock you down?" The guy said, "I guess I'll just have to accept that...." And he hadn't even finished the sentence when the teacher said, "No! If they knock you down, you get back up again. They knock you down a second time, you get up a second time."

You don't give up. If you realize something's really good, really worthwhile, you do whatever you can to attain it. That's the discontent that led to the Buddha's awakening. You don't rest where you are.

If you have a good understanding of how to mingle contentment and discontent in the practice, you'll have a sure footing and you'll go far.