

Contentment vs. Initiative

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Decades ago, when Thailand was facing a Communist threat, American advisors came to offer advice. And they had sociologists come to study Thai culture, Thai society, and Buddhism. And one of the pieces of advice they gave the Thai government was a request that the monks stop teaching contentment, because it was bad for the Thai economy. I know a number of Thai people who laughed about that, because it's a major misunderstanding that being content means that you just sit around and do nothing.

Ajaan Suwat used to like to make the point that even though the Buddha said that greed was a root of unskillful behavior, you should nevertheless show initiative in your life. In other words, if there's wealth to be gained, things to be changed for the better, you do that. And you're developing good qualities of character as you do, qualities that will carry over into the meditation.

There are four of these qualities that the Buddha said lead to happiness in this lifetime. One is that you show initiative, you don't just sit around and be poor.

There are lots of stories about Ajaan Suwat's teacher, Ajaan Funn, berating the farmers up in the northeast because they didn't show any persistence or initiative in looking for a livelihood. They'd try a little of this, a little of that, and they'd run into an obstacle and they'd give up. He said, "Look, if you want to get out of poverty, you've got to work and you've got to keep working."

The same principle applies inside. Ajaan Maha Boowa would talk about how when our minds are scattered all over the place, we're poor. It's when we can develop the internal treasures that come with meditation, that's when we're wealthy inside, wealthy in terms of noble wealth. And whatever initiative you apply in that area is all to the good.

Now this habit of applying initiative is something you have to bring from your daily life. So when you see things around you that need to be fixed, need to be made better, you go ahead and do it.

The second quality is that once you've gained something from your right efforts, you look after it, you maintain it. I got scolded several times from Ajaan Fuang for being wasteful, for not taking care of things properly—even the littlest tiny things. He talked about how Ajaan Mun would take old scraps of cloth and sew them together, to be used as things to wipe your feet on or for other purposes around the monastery. He didn't let anything go to waste. And this is a principle we should try to apply, too.

And then third, you lead your life in a way where you're not being a spendthrift. At the same time, you're not a miser. You use your wealth in line with what you've got. You don't get into debt, but you do provide yourself with some enjoyment from your wealth. After all, if you can't enjoy your wealth, you don't see the goodness in helping other people find enjoyment in their lives, either. It's hard to feel empathetic joy for others when you're not feeling any happiness at all. But you do make sure that you don't get yourself into debt, because it just eats away at you, knowing that you've got something you've got to pay back. And if there's interest, every day becomes an enemy, taking a little bit more, a little bit more away from you. So you lead your life in line with what your earnings are.

And then finally you have good friends, people whose values are in line with the Dhamma, so that you can pick up good habits from them. Avoid the people who would lead you astray. You don't want to associate with the type of people who say, "Let's go and have a little bit of fun," and not really care about the consequences. You want people who say, "Okay, we can find happiness in ways that are responsible."

So these are all activities for your life outside, and they apply inside as well. To begin with, you've got to show initiative in your meditation practice. The mind doesn't settle down on its own, you know. It has a habit of wandering around. That's what *samsāra* is all about: the wandering-on of the mind. It keeps creating new worlds to think about and then to inhabit. You follow them for a while and then, when you get tired of one world, you create another one. You've got lots of worlds going on all at once: That's the normal habit of the mind. And so it's going to take some effort to get the mind to be willing to settle down and to find some contentment being with one thing.

But it's interesting: When the Buddha talks about contentment, there's one area that he says not to be content, and that's you don't settle for things as they are in the mind. In other words, when things are in a bad shape in the mind you can't just say, "Well, I'll just be content with the way things are and let them be that way." You've got to show initiative. He himself said that one of the secrets of how he gained awakening was that he didn't rest content with his skillful qualities. If there were further skills to develop, he'd work on them. So you've got to show initiative in your practice.

But there is a type of inner contentment where, once the mind has a single object, you learn to be happy with that object and you make it as good as you can. This is why in the first *jhana* there's directed thought and evaluation. You keep asking yourself, "Is this as comfortable as I can make the mind right now staying here with the breath? Or can I breathe in a different way? Can I focus in a

different way? Can I think about the breath energy in a different way? Would that make it better?” For instance, with the breath energy: If you feel that you’re struggling with bringing the breath in—sometimes it feels like it is a struggle—remind yourself that the energy itself radiates from within the body. You’re not pulling the energy in from the outside. It’s just the air that’s coming in. The energy radiates from the centers that Ajaan Lee talked about: down around the tip of the breastbone, above your navel, at the base of the throat. Hold that image in mind. And if you have a sense that there’s any blockage in the energy spreading from those spots, okay, that’s something you can work with. This makes it more and more pleasant to be here with the breath. In this way, you’re engaging in the factors of jhana without thinking about jhana. And as you work on this, you find that you *can* finally settle down and be at one, at ease with the breath. This is the result of your initiative.

Then the next step, of course, is that you maintain it. Just as you maintain your wealth outside, looking after it, taking care of the belongings you’ve gained from your labors, you maintain your concentration. Learn how to fend off the voices in the mind that want to think about something else, that get bored very quickly, that want a little more entertainment. They say, “Okay, this is enough quiet for now. Let’s go out and do something.” You say, “Well, no. I’ve got to get really good at staying quiet regardless.” It’s when you fend off those voices that you learn a lot. You see a lot of things you didn’t see before about how the mind can trick itself into running away from what it knows to be good to something it finds in the short term more enjoyable.

And then you *use* your meditation, that’s the third step. You use your concentration to get the mind still enough to see what’s going on so that you can start asking questions. But here, as with your use of your wealth outside, you have to have a sense of proportion. How much concentration do you have? How much can you apply to a particular problem? How do you notice that you’re analyzing something to the point where your concentration gets worn out? When that happens, you have to stop the analysis and come back to the breath.

This is especially important when you’re dealing with the obstreperous voices in your mind, the ones you know are unskillful. To fight them off, you have to analyze them: Where do they get their strength? In other words, if there’s a quality of the mind that you know is unskillful, what is it that you like about it? Often the mind will lie to itself, saying, “I don’t like this at all but I keep going for it.” Well, you go for it because part of you likes it. And what does it like? You have to be stubborn in finding these things out. You have to ask questions.

Sometimes you have to just keep asking dumb-sounding questions. You ask, “Why are you worked up about this?” And another part of you says, “Well, of course, I’m worked about this.” “Well, no. Why?” “Well, because it’s obvious.” “No, it’s not obvious.” As you keep on being insistent, saying that you don’t understand, the mind will begin to open up a little bit more. You’ll begin to see why you like a particular type of thinking even though you know it’s bad for you.

So that’s some of the work you do with your concentration. But after a while you begin to realize you’re not seeing things clearly at all. It’s like a knife you’ve used so much that it’s beginning to get dull. That’s when it’s time to just drop the issue and come back to the breath. And developing the ability to drop things is an important part of the concentration, an important part of the practice.

It’s like learning Thai boxing. The first thing they teach you is how to pull out of a close encounter with the opponent. If he’s getting the best of you, you’ve got to pull out. But how do you pull out so that you don’t just run away? And how do you pull out so that you don’t expose yourself, so that he doesn’t knock you down? There’s a skill to that, and it’s the first thing they teach you.

In the same way, as you’re practicing concentration you need to have the attitude that no matter what thought comes up that’s not related to the breath, you have to pull out of it. You’re not going to go running with it. Even if it’s an interesting thought about some issue in daily life, some job you’ve got going, you’ve got to say, “This is not the time for that.” And be really strict with yourself. In that way, you can learn how to use your concentration, in other words, how to spend it without being a spendthrift. You use it to develop discernment. When you find that it’s getting a little dull, okay, you stop the questions of discernment and come back to the concentration.

Then finally, having good friendship, on this level, means realizing which members of your mind’s committee you can trust and which ones you can’t. This is something you have to learn over time. Because some of the voices—especially the strict-sounding ones—seem to be voices of Dhamma, but after you get to know them for a while you begin to realize, no, they’re going to pull you away. And so you associate with the voices that keep looking for long-term happiness, a happiness that’s reliable, a happiness that’s blameless, the voices that keep you encouraged to stay on the path and keep your values straight. This ability helps you stay on the path over the long term.

So these four qualities that are good for finding happiness outside—having initiative; taking good care of your things; not being a spendthrift, but not being a miser; and having reliable friends, admirable friends—also apply inside as you try to get the mind to settle down.

They're good qualities to keep in mind so that you gain a sense of proportion in what you should be content with and what you should not be content with, which desires you should let go of and which desires you should actually foster. The Dhamma has nuance around these issues. It doesn't say that desire is all bad or that contentment is all good. There's a time and place for both. And a lot of the wisdom that you develop in the course of the practice is learning how to figure out what the right time and place is for these things, so that you prosper both outside and inside. And the Dhamma helps as a tool in your search for that prosperity.