

## *Exploring Contentment*

*October 31, 2011*

The Buddha once attributed the fact that he gained awakening to the quality of not staying content with where he was in his practice. Now this may seem strange, because we know that contentment is an important principle in the practice. But you have to understand which things to be content about and which not to be content about. And even in the areas where the Buddha taught contentment, you have to understand exactly what it means.

Not being content with where he was in the practice meant that as long as there was still any suffering or any cause of suffering in his mind, he wouldn't allow the practice just to sit there. He would try to figure out what was causing that suffering and what qualities he would have to develop in order to see even deeper into the mind.

That was something he was always working on. We see this in the story of his life. He gained really high levels of concentration from his study with his two teachers, but he realized that those levels of concentration didn't constitute the total end of suffering. It just led to a very refined state of mind in the present moment and a very refined rebirth. But when the power of that practice was over, he'd fall back down to where he'd started. So he knew he had to look deeper.

So he tried the path of austerities: self-torment. He did it for six years and, as he said, he didn't know anyone who had gone further on that path than he had. A lesser person might have rested content with that—the pride that comes with that kind of accomplishment. But he knew that it was not really a worthwhile accomplishment in the sense that it didn't really put an end to suffering. So he had to look for another way.

That's one of the amazing things about the Buddha, his ability to put his pride aside. He didn't let the sense of his attainments get in the way. There was a case later, when he became Buddha, he saw that there was a Brahma—aka Brahma, one of the devas we chanted about just now—who decided he'd reached the end of the practice. He thought that there was nothing higher than where he was, and so was extremely proud of his attainment. So the Buddha visited his Brahma world. He had to show him there was somebody who knew more than he did—more than Baka Brahma did—because it's so easy when you gain an attainment either in terms of concentration or in terms of psychic powers, to allow your pride to get in the way. And the Buddha, by seeing that that was a problem, was able to get past it.

So that's an area of the practice where you don't rest content. You look at where you are and if you see any potential for suffering or even a slight amount of stress anywhere in your awareness, you know that there's still something you've got to work on. And you work on it. That doesn't mean you throw away your concentration and work simply on discernment. If

you realize that your concentration needs development, you work at that, and you allow it to mature. You allow it to settle in and become a good foundation.

So lack of contentment here doesn't mean that you try to rush through things; it simply means that you realize there's more work to be done, and you do what needs to be done, even if it means developing patience, developing endurance, so that the practice finally will bear fruit.

The area where the Buddha does teach contentment is around the outside circumstances of your life. If there are things you can't change, you learn how to accept them. But you've got to test that. What exactly can you change and what can't you change? Think about cooking. Say you've got an egg. That's all you've got, so you have to be content with the egg. But that doesn't mean you eat the thing raw, or that you eat the shell. You have to figure out which parts of the egg are useful, which ones are not, and then how you get the most advantage out of the parts that are useful. You learn how to cook the egg in various ways so that it really does give a benefit to the body. Otherwise, if you don't know how to handle it, it actually can become poisonous. And the same principle applies to your situation in life. You figure out what can be changed and—given the situation—what you can do to improve things. In other words, you want to learn skills so that you can walk into a situation and get the most out of it.

That's the approach you take to the breath. It's not a matter of simply sitting with whatever the breath is going to do—because, as you're going to find out, what the breath can do is not totally out of your control. There's an element of your shaping in it: your intention, whether conscious or subconscious, in how you want the body to feel in the present moment, which is going to shape the rate at which you breathe, the depth, the speed, the length of the breath. There's an element of fabrication that goes into this that you really want to get to know. And the best way to get to know it is to learn how to fashion things in a skillful way.

So contentment here doesn't mean just putting up with whatever the breath is doing, because there are ways in which the breath can really get unhealthy. You get into bad feedback loops where there's a pain in the body, so you breathe in a way that tries to avoid the pain. That constricts the breath even more and makes the pain worse. You want to learn how to get out of that feedback loop. One way is to deliberately breathe very deeply, very long, even though in the beginning it may seem strenuous and not all that comfortable. But you find that it resets the body so that you get out of that feedback loop.

There are lots of things you can learn about the breath as you play with it, watch it, play with it some more, and watch it some more. In this way, it's like learning how to take that egg and get the most use out of the egg.

This means that contentment isn't just a matter of putting up with whatever's there. It means figuring out what you can change to your advantage. As for the things you can't change for the time being, you learn how to accept them and work around them. But you're always testing the limits. You don't just say, okay, everything is inconstant, stressful, and not-self, so

just let it be inconstant, stressful, and not-self. You actually have to push against those characteristics.

You're trying to find a state of mind that's relatively constant, that has some ease—as much ease as you can make, actually—and that you can learn how to control as much as you can, because that's going to be your path. Ultimately, you will run up against the fact that even the greatest states of concentration have their limitations. And it's there on that frontier where the limitations are: That's where you're going to gain discernment. But if you don't know where the frontier is, you just simply accept things or give up. I know some people who say, "Well, the path is something that's impermanent. Concentration is impermanent. Even awakening is impermanent, so you've just got to accept impermanence and stop trying, relax." That doesn't accomplish anything. That attitude actually short-circuits the path.

As we meditate, we're exploring to locate the line between what we can control and what we can't control, and trying to make the most of what we can. That's the attitude that the Buddha wants us to develop toward contentment. In other words, it's not just a matter of sitting with whatever's there; it's learning how to make the best use of what you've got, both in terms of your outside surroundings and in terms of the mind. In that way, the principle of contentment and not-contentment becomes a single principle.

So keep trying to explore that frontier, because that's where these two principles do become one. And they really do work toward a happiness that's worthy of contentment on the deepest possible level.