

# 2014-08-17 Contentment

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

contentment, cultivate, content, noble, letting, people, cultivation, monastic, buddha, stone cutter, qualities, person, delight, wise, understands, requisites, desire, ascetics, world, danger

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So good morning. This morning, I'd like to talk about contentment. And in doing so I'd like to introduce it with a couple of things. And in talking about it, I'd like to talk about it, in reference to a discourse of the Buddha that I learned recently was one of the most popular discourses for many centuries in Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism, and that apparently, a tremendous number of Dharma talks have been given on this particular sutta. And it's one that I just recently discovered, learned, learned about. And it has to do about contentment. It's kind of interesting that the tradition for many centuries had that as a central theme for teaching. So, in saying that very interesting thing to observe how in the ancient scriptures of Buddha them that a number of places and he talks about what the essential teachings are, like a pithy kind of version of teachings are in the essence. And generally when it does, so does it that way. It don't give a doctrine, but rather they talk about qualities of being states of being. And so and one of those that's often mentioned is contentment as being important. There's a little saying that if you seek what you do not need, you risk not enjoying what you have. So if you seek what you do not need your risk, not enjoying what you have already have. Last week, I gave a talk on generosity and generosity is an interesting Word etymology, the history of that word. Because nowadays it means to give, abundantly to give without expectation to give gifts. It comes from the same root, same root as the word Gentry, or even genus and originally meant, like a noble class in society. And an inch in the middle, you know, in the Middle Ages in England, it's meant to refer to the noble class and the noble class when you were nobility, you had certain quality, certain kind of ways in which you carried yourself and, and those ways were considered to be generous qualities before it meant to give just means to be be like a noble person. And then slowly over the centuries in England, it became the those qualities of a noble person were then attributes Did are people to everyone else as well. And as it became attributed to everyone else, it became kind of coalesced around this quality of what we call nowadays being generous, to kind of strange, strange history, right? It's very nice. So originally it meant originally, but it has meaning of that which belongs to a noble person. And this suit, that is discourse that I'd like to refer to, is called the tradition of the noble ones, the tradition or the lineage, the custom of the noble, noble ones. And the word noble was a term used for people who had matured in Buddhist practice who had a degree of liberation. And in that maturation, they had certain qualities certain capacities. And here nobility was not didn't refer to how you were born born into the noble class which they had back in, in India's time, but rather read referred to anybody could become having ability, if they matured and behave in certain ways, and those who have matured the most in the Buddhist tradition, as Buddhist practitioners were called noble ones. And so, this text is called the title is the custom or the tradition of the noble ones. And here it goes. The Buddha said, there are these four noble customs, Primal of long standing traditional, ancient, and never before adulterated which are not being adulterated and will not be adulterated which are not repudiated by wise ascetics and Brahmins. What for.

Here, a monastic here at monastics are content with any kind of robe and they speak in rays of contentment with any kind of robe and they do not engage in wrong speech in what is improper for the sake of a robe. If they do not get a robe, they are not agitated. And if they do get one, they use it without being tied to it, infatuated with it, and blindly absorbed in it, seeing the danger in it and understanding the escape from it. Yet they do not extol themselves or disparage others because of this. Any monastic who is skillful in this diligent, clearly comprehending and ever mindful, is said to be standing in an ancient primal noble lineage. So, here they are lineage across the word is an Pali bomb. So, I can also mean customer tradition here to translate his lineage. So, if you want to join in the community of these noble people, You don't have to believe in something like a doctrine, but rather you have to behave in a certain way or have certain qualities. And the quality here is contentment. This passage in particular, a paragraph here had to do with robes. The next two paragraphs have to do with food and with lodging, and these are considered three of the three the requisites that monastics are expected to be able to have and to live live by and the basic needs that people have food, lodging and, and, and clothes to where the fourth requisite as medicine is not mentioned here. And to be content with us, the Buddha himself did not live as ascetically as he was possible for aesthetics in ancient India. In fact, he says some places that there were Some of his disciples live the more ascetic life than he did sometimes. But rather he was content and lived peacefully with what was offered to him. And if really rich food was offered, he was content with that. If really poor food was given, he was content with that. If he was if he had rough, poor robes to wear, he was content with that if people gave him really fine, refined cloth to where he would be content with that, come, easy come easy go. But he wasn't like holding on like you're supposed to be looked like a patchwork patchwork monk who only wears poor things. If it was given then he was lived this way. And so, the way that monastic community was set up was to be a community that had its basic needs taking taken care of, but enough so that people will come Trouble, and they could practice but not so much that it became a burden for them. That the you know, they had to you know, spend a lot of trouble keeping a going up keeping it. The beautiful image from the ancient times that the Buddha used was monastic should be like birds, with birds, flying birds that only have to carry their wings. Because imagine a bird having to carry a lot of luggage, you know, it's not going to get very far. And so kind of that kind of sense of freedom of just being liked. So, a monastic is content with any kind of clothes, and speaks in praise of contentment with any kind of clothes. Probably many of you are relatively content with your close. We don't progress up a lot here. Some of you might watch I was kind of proud of herself, I think this week last week, we have 11 year old at home and she went, she went and bought new pants for him for the new school year. And she came home and said, I literally did that I bought three pairs of pants in five minutes. We went in, we tried one on we bought them and we're out of there in five minutes. She was she doesn't like to shop. So there was she was very content with that kind of process of buying clothes.

And a monastic does not engage in wrong search, in what is improper for the sake of clothes. So here with the basic requisites, we have the things we basically need to get by with to don't go out and pursue them, getting them in improper ways, the ways that cause harm in our society harm to yourself. And one of the interesting cases I think for anybody who wants to practice deeply seriously. And I don't know, how is what do you spend your time doing? And is your time spent on activities that further your spiritual practice? Or activity, which doesn't? Where it's what's the balance? And if you look at things that don't help your spiritual practice, is the pursuit of things. You really need part of that. And where's that line between what's needed and what's not needed? And I don't think I'm not going to try to tell you what that is for you. But I think everyone's going to be different. But I think it's a really good question to explore and consider, what is it I really need? And what is it that I pursue and engage in and tried to have, which I don't really need and in pursuing it, it doesn't really better me. It doesn't really improve the quality of my life. There's some ancient saying that goes something like

The floor of a hay barn can be just right for 10 poppers to sleep in. But a vast kingdom is not big enough for two kings. So, you know, when do we when are we content with what we have? And when do we keep pursuing more and more and more? And when do we, and what are we trying to pursue when we pursue more? What are the other question if it's anything beyond what we actually need? I think it's really interesting to look why'd it Why am I pursuing that? What am I pursuing? What are my needs? So certainly we have needs that are greater than these basic requisites of food, lodging and close. What are the emotional needs? What are the intellectual needs we have what are the social needs we have? But what do we pursue? That's more than that? And what does it mean to be not contented? And what does it mean to be contented? Some people feel that contentment is a state. Whereas being contented is, is focused on particular things, you're contented with certain things that you have. But you can be content and how this works in English to be kept contentment. As a state, the attitude that you carry with you. And this is one of the things we're trying to cultivate in Buddhism are states that we carry with us knowing that states are impermanent, we rely more on States than we do on particular valuations of the moment. So it's possible to have a feeling of deep satisfaction, of fulfillment and carry that with you into the world. So that when you see something In advertisements, something that's great. You don't get pulled into the desire to have that. And I could see I've see I see that in myself regularly. We live in I live in a society where consumer society where new things are constantly being presented to me now that literally with advertisement news even like, it's like front page of the news when they come out with a new smartphone. Wow. Like, you know, imagine I remember, you know, 40 years ago, you think that the telephone company back then came back then the telephone company owned the phones that we had in our homes, but I grew up the way they own them. We think it was big news when they came up with a new phone. New telephone comes out with a new rotary phone. those holes in the rotary dial are a little bit bigger. It was a new design. And we all rush out to get the bigger the anyway, so all this new stuff comes along and then we want to have it I see it I have teenagers at home and we can watch the styles of clothes come and go in what he wants to wear, you know to go out and get that now and it wears out for a while and then I guess it goes out of style and then something else comes along and it's important to have that particular style. Someone has pointed out that the fashion industry seems to be very clever to have these regular cycles. Because you can't do that Mayor you can't do that. They can't be that varied what you do with fashion. So they have started periods where high sheet high heels are in in style and lower ones than lower ones and it goes up again, down. You know, and by time that the very higher heels come back in most of your high heels have been thrown away. So you have to get new ones. I don't know if it actually works. I don't buy high heels. You know, smartphones, I noticed when they come up, when the you know, new ones come out, they still look, I read the ads and wow, that's interesting. So, you know, so we're bombarded with opportunities for more. And we live in a society that's relatively affluent, many of us on this side of the tracks. There are other sides of the tracks even Redwood City where people are not affluent. And so it's so easy to want more to want the next thing to want something good to want something so that we look good in the eyes of others look great in the eyes of our neighbors. And so want more than we need. But what happens when we have cultivated contentment.

What is it if we see contentment as an attitude that we can cultivate and then carry with us into our day. And one of the things that can happen is that when the when the temptations arise when things appear that you want, you can you can actually feel the desire arise, see the thought arise and feel what that does to the state of fulfillment or contentment or satisfaction you have, and then feeling that difference. You can feel that there's a loss in starting to pursue the desire. There's a loss of connection to oneself, a loss of wholeness, a lot of loss of kind of kind of a good feeling of pleasure, actually. And so, why would you lose that? But the danger is that if you start losing that satisfaction, That sense of contentment, and start moving into the world of desire and wanting, when we start losing connection with ourselves that then it's easy to become a self perpetuating alienation. It's easy to get pulled into the world of desire pulled into the world of wanting, pulled into the world of need of insufficiency, all of

which have to do with thinking. Even this strong sense unless you're hungry, the strong sense of being insufficient of being lack is a kind of evaluation when so lack of the next iPhone, lack of the next, whatever it might be. And that world of thinking that we could spin in, spins around and fuels desire is an alienating world. And it but if you can, if you can feel yourself being pulled into it, then you can say, Well, I don't need to go there. This is a certain kind of danger is kind of not comfortable to go there. Or if you go there far enough, and you have the reference point of knowing what deep contentment is like, then you know that that's not the only place to be. And I believe there are people who live their lives in discontent, and always wanting and wanting. So meditation is one of the places in Buddhism where we try to cultivate the contentment, the deep sense of being fulfilled and satisfied, just as we are, just as things are at this moment. It's possible to sit down and meditate, close your eyes and meditate and let go of thoughts about all the things you might be wanting, let go of thoughts but all the things which are not right in your life, all the things that are challenging in your life, all the things which are you're in conflict with all the things you know, so much so much stuff with the life certainly, we can let go of we sit down to meditate. And as we let go of it, we it's possible to have an experience of peace Well being independent of all those real and imaginary problems we have in our life. And it's a radical thing to know that you can have peace, independent of your problems. It's not great. If you think your peace is dependent on solving your problems, then you'll be chasing your problems or giving up or feeling despair. But if you know there's peace, independent of your problems, then it's possible to maintain that peace in the midst of dealing with your problems or your challenges. It's possible to have contentment and realize things need to be improved and do things with things. So to get back to this text

the monastic content with the requisites. But in being content and maybe enjoying them, feeling satisfied with them, understands the danger in them understands that there's a danger of getting attached getting caught and understands the escape from being caught. And this is one of the repeated teachings of the Buddha. He does this a lot and his teachings that it's a wise person understands the gratitude, the greater the English translation is, understands the gratification of something, the pleasure of it, the danger of it and escape from it. So rather than denying things, certain things should be enjoyed, can be enjoyed, are gratifying, and make and it's fine to understand that and to be gratified by things. At the same time, it's important to know the danger in the very things that are gratifying and the danger is we can get Lost in a world and get caught in it. And in many ways, and then wise person knows the escape from my top knows how not to get caught. These three things are considered that you can't i can't underscore how often the Buddha teaches this. You understand the gratification, the enjoyment of something, the danger of it and escape from it. The person understands this, but the person who's content knows how to be content satisfied, knows that this wisdom about things does not extol they do not extol themselves or disparage others because of it. Isn't that great? So because I'm so content, you know, you guys should get on with it. You know, you don't. One of the great stories, one of the great rules. Buddhist monks have a lot of rules to live by. They've, the monks have 227 and the nuns have a few more And what are the rules for monks? I don't know if it's probably same room for the nuns is they go out into the get their food in a bowl, usually bigger than this size nowadays. And then they come back and they eat out of their bowl. And people put everything in the bowl. So they put the soups, the salads, the desserts, you know, everything goes in the same bowl. And so the rule is that when you eat out of your bowl, you're not supposed to have eat preferentially, like first a salad and then the soup and then the dessert, you know, you're supposed to just eat it is as it comes out. And that's the rule. Another rule is that if, if you're a monk, sitting next to a monk who's eating, you're not allowed to look into the bowl to see how he's doing.

And then that was very nice. It's a private rule. So anyway, so to be content is also is has this aspect to do with our ego. We don't build ourselves up ego out of it and we don't do the opposite which is to criticize others or disparage others because of how we live our lives. So it's fine to be content but don't

use that as comparison comparative thinking. And often a lot of the discontent many people have I think probably in our society in particular, is a lot have as comparative thinking. We compare ourselves to others we want to be like them, we want to be better than them, and all that and we probably some of you know the story, kind of his fairy tale story of it was a stone cutter Like, who worked hard all day. And on the way home, went by the store of a wealthy merchant who was decked out in nice clothes and lots of good comfortable food and a stone cutter. But I wish that I could be like that person, then I wouldn't have to do all these rock cutting all day long. And poof by magic, he became the merchant. And he was happy you couldn't believe his good luck. Good clothes, good food wasn't as great and, and then as he looked out his window of his store he saw being carried in a naked you know, now kind of a carriage was a local high official of the government who had more power than the merchant supply. I wish I could have that kind of power perfectly became the official And living that life, he couldn't believe his good luck until he went to the court and saw the king. That person's powerful I wouldn't be I would like to be powerful like that person. He became the king and the exalt and he was happy until he went out across his lands. And it was a really hot day. And he couldn't believe how hot it was. He had take off his cape, and it's, you know, the cool off. That Sun is really powerful, more powerful than I am. I wish I could be the sun. Poof, he became the sun. And so then he was this sun for a while. But then the clouds came over and block the sun from reaching the ground. And the sun thought all those clouds are more powerful than me. They're blocking me. I wish I could be a cloud. And so he became a cloud. And then as a cloud, the wind came along and blew all the clouds away. The wind is more powerful than me. I want to be the wind. The most powerful at all, and say became the wind. And it was great to be when he push all these leaves around and trees bent over. And he was great. But there was something that didn't move. big rocks didn't move in the wind. I wish I could be a rock, they were in a really powerful and strong so he became a rock. And then you sitting there as a rock, he looked out. And there was a stone cutter chipping away at the stone.

So always wanting more better, more powerful, whatever kind of comparative thinking so. So there's three kinds of contentment. So this text gets now a little bit more interesting, I think. So hopefully I've conveyed the idea that this tradition puts tremendous emphasis on the value of contentment, cultivating contentment, reflecting on it. And I think the reason why these Dharma talks are often given on contentment is to be reminded of it. So it's a Fresh in our minds, we're using it as a reference point. We're using it as a, as a, as a teaching with which to understand our lives. And this idea of using teachings not to use teachings as something to believe, but use teachings as a reference point. So we can look at ourselves and question ourselves more deeply. So if contentment is a valuable thing, it's good to be reminded about it so it's fresh in your mind you just lose track of it. So let's talk about here this as I said, three kinds of contentment with the basic requisites. So if this book says are for customs of the noble ones, so the three requisites and now the fourth one, the fourth one is not the customer's not about contentment, but now is about the light that the noble ones delight in this what I'm going to say is a nice you've been content long enough, you know, and contentment can seem a little bit dull and boring. And he's not quite so exciting and inspiring. So, you know, you know. So now comes to the light. monastics, the light in cultivation are delighted with cultivation find a light in a letting go and are delighted with letting go and yet they do not extol themselves or disparage others because of this any monastic any monastics who are skilled in this is said to be standing in an ancient primal noble tradition. Custom. So, here it talks about delighting in the cultivation and divine delighting and letting go. Cultivation is the word bhavana is the word, sometimes translated as meditation practice, but has a better meaning you to cultivate and develop these good qualities inside of us. So it develop, not to leave it to chance that we should feel good inside and have good qualities, but to make the effort to mature within us, things like contentment, or ethical integrity, our generosity, our wisdom, our capacity for mindfulness and attention, our capacity for concentration, there's all these things that can be cultivated. And a really important part of Buddhist practice is to spend the time it takes to cultivate and



strengthen our the capacities we have inside the good capacities we have. And if you don't do that, if you don't do a little bit of effort to cultivate what's good inside of you, then you'll still get cultivated. The mind is, is constantly being shaped. The human mind is placid, it's malleable. Our inner psyche is constantly being shaped by things and if you don't shape it Then it's gonna be shaped by your society, shaped by advertisers and politicians and whatever else is going on. It can be shaped by your maybe not the best qualities of who you are. But if you choose to behave and think and cultivate certain things, then you shape the mind in good ways. And this idea of taking responsibility for the shape of our mind, the shape of our hearts, is a very important part of Buddhist practice. So we cultivate things and so regular meditation practice is one of the ways to cultivate cultivate ability to become concentrated to develop a stronger mind. So here it says, the person delights in this. I like very much this text first talks about contentment, and not comparing yourself to others. And then it talks about meditation practice and cultivation. Because without some modicum of being knowing how to be content with yourself and your situation, It's very hard to meditate. It's very hard to do this inner cultivation. And perhaps one of the first things to cultivate is contentment. Because then when you sit down to meditate, you sit down kind of content, you know how to sit down and not compare yourself to others better or worse than and just sit and be with that kind of contentment, then it's easier to do the practice and to cultivate oneself. And then the other thing to delight in is in letting go.

So to let go of that which we don't need, let go of the ways in which we cling and hold. These Some people say that these are the two big sides of Buddhist practice the side of cultivation and the title letting go. They're both needed. They're needed sometimes at different times. But letting go is such a great thing. If you're new, if you really had experience with letting go and healthy and wise ways that you would find letting go to be joyful. Letting Go is a lightning. It's a freeing, it's an opening. It's you're not diminished by letting go, you're enhanced and you grow by letting go. If you're if you're diminished by your letting go, then it's probably your letting go has not been healthy, maybe not appropriate. But ad and Buddhism is letting go is a source of delight. So here it says. So one of the customs of the noble ones is that they are delighted in letting go. So what do you know about the delight of letting go? Have you experienced the joy of it? Being an experienced how letting go, you know, lifts load, you drop the burden from your shoulders, your heart gets opened? Your mind clears up. It just like you feel so you know, you know, it's just feel so good. Have you had experiences like that? Or do you hear teachings on letting go You feel all these Buddhists they're so they're party poopers You know, they're these ascetics, they don't have a good time they want no one to have a good time. And just letting go is all they talk about. They are Ajahn Amaro, who is a monk they live in California for many years. He has a he wrote an article, it was an interview because the interview he did with enquiring mind 20 years ago, and the title of it was, monks have more fun.

So, to be content, to have contentment as a foundation for practice, to have a practice where we both learn to cultivate ourselves and to let go, but to have the light in that cultivation, to have delight in letting go. One of the things that I find very meaningful for me something I enjoy. I guess I delight in I celebrate in great appreciation is that I have a practice, I have this Buddhist practice that I do. I have opportunities to develop it and engage in it. And sometimes when my life is a big challenge, I have a lot of challenges sometimes. And sometimes the challenges I have I don't feel like I'm very good at practicing with it. Like I have this practice, but it feels like it's like, uphill. It's hard, you know? But I delight that I have a practice. I just feel so good, like a refuge just like supports like, wow, am I lucky? You know, it's a good practice. I know it's a good practice. But I got to do it, you know, no, hang in there and keep working on it in this difficult situation. I'm in the idea of being delighted if you I feel so lucky. I guess because I have so much confidence in it. I know. I know the power of it. I know how far you can go with it. So contentment and the light. So these are considered the noble customs and noble tradition or the traditions of the noble ones. Isn't that nice? So if you want to join in the tradition of the noble

ones, all you got to do is be contented and delighted in the cultivating your heart and minds, and cold and delighted and your capacity to let go in a wise way. So it's not nice. Come join us. So we have a couple of minutes any thing anyone would like to say or ask any of that.

When you talked about being distracted by desire, it reminded me of a saying You can never get enough of what you don't really want. can never get in, you can never get enough of what you don't really want.

The idea that getting some of what you don't really want turns out to not be enough. So then you go to get more of what you don't really want. And then you need more of what I say I see I'm following you, I guess because I regularly don't want what I don't want, right? Because you can get enough of that. I mean, it should go after what you don't really want. Yeah, then you'll never get it. Not enough. Not enough. Yeah. So I'm going to try to get as many of you a wonderful, generous person tried to give me something this week. A gift was you know, I don't usually say no to gifts, but it was offered. It was offered more like you know, tentatively, you know, just something you would I gave if I gave it to you, would you like this? And it was beautiful. I really appreciated both the gesture and gifts and what it was and I said, Look, you know, really? I don't know what more someone else Yes. Oh,

thank you, um, those things that closed dwelling and medicine and lodging,

lodging a dwelling.

I get course get hooked by all of those. But what stickier for me it feels like his love, attention, activity join activity, you know, with the person I love. So, it's interesting that that's not expressed as a basic need, which in some ways it isn't, isn't but also would that same process apply to those

things so I think that

I mean, it's a form of clinging obviously,

I think it can apply for sure to consider what is it? What would be enough of these things that you're asking for, like love, where you'd be contented? Can you be you know how to be contented in those things? What would it look like? What are the dangers in love? There's a couple. And what's the escape from it? What's the freedom from it? And to know those three things, then you can go into that realm, probably in a wiser way. But here's an observation for you about what I've seen about the people who are I've seen in the Buddhist world have been most most spiritually mature people that I've known. They seem to have a tremendous capacity to love but no need to be loved. That's something where would you rather? Would you rather love? Or would you rather be loved? It's an interesting question. Where do you fit on that spectrum? So, oh, can you be contented without asking? Then you could ask

it's not really an ask. It's more just an observation about myself. Yes, hard about letting go and experiencing kind of an openness and an expansion and a delight in that. And sometimes for me, like, like, I'll take an example of like a really petty argument. And there's a part of me that wants to like have the last final word. And there's a part of me that's like, what are you doing let this go. And if I choose to let it go for a little while, there's there's a I feel contracted actually, there's a part of me that still is like you sold yourself out. You didn't stand up for yourself, you should have blah, blah, blah, and then maybe a month later, be like, I'm so glad I disengaged from that, but it's not immediate. So it makes it really hard. It feels like a lot of effort.

Okay, it can be yes. I appreciate hearing that. And I don't want the last word, but I'll say a few words. I mean, your observation is that stands by itself and I've seen that as well. You know, the some people have said that the mind has no shame. I think what they mean is that the mind has all these crazy things is involved in desires, egotism, and identity issues. And, and, and so it doesn't just go away easily. So your wisdom might operate, to say, let to let go of having the last word, but you're not only wise. Right, you have your mixed bag in there. And so the other part is going to get sometimes get stirred up even more you'd like go but then you've got are nowhere in doubt and judgments and that dissatisfaction can go on for some time. And then maybe eventually, the strength of it decreases and you can can drop fine. Yeah, I think that's expected to read even, you know, sometimes we need more wisdom after we've made a wide display decision than before. Well, thank you all very much. And I would encourage you during this week, to frequently and regularly make contentment, a theme for you and maybe have conversations with friends about it. Think about what you've learned over your lifetime and where you fit in this contentment. range and what do you know about contentment as an attitude that you carry with you in different situations, as opposed to contentment for particular things? What does it mean to walk walk in this world in a contented way? Thank you all.