

# Dharmette: Wise Contentment, Wise Discontent

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on June 27, 2018

The theme for this morning is contentment. It's a very important part of the practice. The Buddha associated contentment with a certain kind of joy. It creates a foundation for a meditation practice. The Buddha sometimes had a series of foundations, each one a foundation for the next. Contentment is the foundation for being able to put aside the hindrances – the five distracting forces inside of us. With contentment, we can put aside the distractions and settle into the practice.

I don't know how popular the topic contentment is. You don't regularly hear on the news that so-and-so experienced contentment today. It's not usually news-worthy. Maybe it should be, because contentment has such a profound impact on people. Contentment comes with a feeling of being settled, a willingness to be here. Contentment is a feeling that some aspect of the present moment is good, or is enough. We're not feeling agitated or inadequate. We're not feeling that the situation is somehow less than ideal. It's adequate, and we're content with it.

An important part of practice is to reflect on contentment and discontentment, and to learn how to have a wise relationship with both. There's a time for contentment, and there's actually a time for wise discontent. It isn't either-or, as though you should have only contentment, and not ever be discontented again. But rather, there are wise forms of both. There are also unwise forms of both, because certainly you can be content at times when you shouldn't be content.

A place to begin understanding wise contentment is with what's called the basic requisites of our human life. To be content is to have enough to basically be taken care of. We have enough shelter. We have adequate food, clothing, and basic health care. It's remarkable that many of us in this particular corner of the universe have housing, food, and clothing, and medical care to some degree. But it's still so easy to feel discontented with what we have.

Here we have some of the best medical care in the world. It may not be the best, but what's available is pretty phenomenal in the history of humanity. Even comparing what's available here with other places in the world, you can still be discontented: "There must be a better doctor. My doctor didn't study the latest journal articles." It's certainly true that sometimes it's good to research and look further, but to have this discontent?

The housing that people have! How many people are discontented with their housing? Maybe none of you, but there are people who want more, or bigger, or something different. And clothing! How many different pieces of clothing do you have? How often do you go shopping for more? The styles have changed, but do you really need it?

The Buddha specifically talked about contentment with the basic requisites of life, not as a form of asceticism, but as a way of emphasizing and supporting something different: a mind that is not agitated by those things. Instead of being agitated by wanting more, we can get the benefits of appreciating what we have – not because it's Pollyannaish to appreciate what we have. It's just strategic if you want to be a meditator.

If you want to settle and quiet your mind, to not have a distracted mind, it really helps if you cultivate a degree of contentment with what you have in life. You might want to assess the things that you have, that you need, and that you want to have. Are they really needs? Is the cost-benefit analysis really in your favor if what you want is a contemplative life? If you want to use this practice of meditation to open up your heart and mind in new ways, is it really worth spending your time feeling like: "I don't have the latest gadget," or "I need something else," or "I need more of this," or "I need more of that?"

The food thing is just astounding. Ever since I've been involved in Buddhism, for over 40 years, it's amazing the discontent and neurosis around people's food issues. Of course, it's never neurotic or astounding when it's current. But in a perspective of forty years, the trends that have come through! Every trend seems like, "This is it!" But if I go back over these 40 years and look at all the trends, it's just a different content in which to not be contented. I love it that content and content are the same word. So you have to wonder, at least a teeny bit,

whether the latest thing is really the greatest. Is it? Really? Maybe it is, but are you sacrificing your contentment because you feel like you have to have this food?

One of the interesting places we see this is on the weeklong retreats we teach. Some people have such concerns around their diet. Some people do have to be concerned with their diet; it's really important. But some people who are concerned about their diet could go a week and not have any dire consequences. But they come with all their stuff, and they make sure it's just right. I remember there was one person who was all about having no dairy fat – that was so important! But now in recent years, it's "I have to have dairy fat because it says so in *The New York Times*." It's a whole new thing, but with the same passion [laughter]. Yes, mistrustful lady looking at me [laughs], I'm sorry. Maybe I shouldn't be talking this way.

But what are we sacrificing? Why are we willing to be discontented? Is there more contentment that we can be nourished and supported by, that can help us be settled and feel adequate, or at least let go of inadequacy? I would like to suggest that there are many more reasons to be content than most people avail themselves of.

But it can be overdone. You don't want to be content with your suffering: "I'm suffering and content with it. It's great, and I'll just go on suffering." In Buddhism, we're supposed to have wise discontent with suffering – to be intolerant of it, but not aversive to it, or agitated by it. There's a healthy way of being discontented with suffering, which actually helps settle the mind: "I don't have to live with this. I don't want to keep suffering in the same way, or have the same anxiety or desperation. I want to address this. And I want to address it seriously, with integrity, and in a noble way. I have a path of practice. Buddhism is here to address it."

To know that there is a path and a practice and you're not going to put up with it can actually be very reassuring for parts of your heart and mind. There is a way of having discontent with suffering. In some ways, the more mature people become in practice, the deeper they go, and the more they become discontented with their suffering in a wonderful way. They're okay with having it. The more they practice, the more mature and relaxed they are. They don't have a problem with having some suffering. It's okay. But they're also not content with it, thinking, "This is how it should be."

They say, "Okay, this is something to meet, to address, to be with, to work with, and find a way through. It can be quite inspiring. In fact, it can bring a lot of joy to know you have a practice that meets your suffering. You're so lucky! And you can be content. Rather than being discontented because of having suffering, be content that you are discontent. So what I'm trying to say is, "Be content you have a practice that addresses a healthy discontent with suffering."

There's a range. There's a time for discontentment and a time for contentment. It's helpful and healing to call upon contentment, to make it more a part of your life, to take times during the day when you sit in a contented way, rather than always on the go, and always discontented. Are there times when you can sit and have a cup of tea, and use that time as an opportunity to be contented? What begins to be nourished, what begins to open, and what begins to settle in you when you take some time to appreciate your contentment?

There are times when it's really good to address suffering – the attachments, clinging, and sorrows we have – be discontented with just accepting it as it is, and meet it with practice and contentment. To have contentment with "Wow, I have this practice!" To be content with being able to address it practice-wise, to not be in a hurry, and see how it goes.

So may each of you be content in just the right way. And may each of you be discontented in just the right way. Good luck.

Thank you.