

Finding our Way (1 of 5) With Contentment and Discontent

August 1, 2022

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Paulo Coelho, fisherman, businessman

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We start a new series on this general topic of emotions, which I have been covering in the last weeks. This week, the theme is the emotional states we have that are kind of opposites of each other. These emotional states live in relationship to each other, like a pendulum that swings from one side to the other. Sometimes we react to one emotional state and the other arises, and vice versa. Or both sides of this range have a place in our lives, and so to appreciate that these two sides live in dynamic relationship to each other and to appreciate and understand them deeper.

Today I want to talk about contentment and discontent. There is healthy contentment and healthy discontent, and there is unhealthy contentment and unhealthy discontent. So to really look and see more deeply what is this world of contentment and discontent that we live in.

To live in a world of discontent is often a world of suffering. To continue living in a world of stress – of greed, of hatred – is stressful. It can arise out of our discontent with how things are, and we can pile more discontent on top of it. Out of the discontent and difficulties of our life, we can get caught up in greed, hatred, and fear.

There's a healthy discontent with suffering. Buddhist practice does involve discontentment and even intolerance, in a certain particular way, to our suffering. Not intolerance where intolerance is associated with hostility, bias, or prejudice, but rather, intolerance with suffering: "I'm not going to be content with a life of suffering. I'm not going to be content with a life in which I'm miserable and live in constant fear, discouragement, or stress." And that inspires practice. It is certain discontent that inspires practice.

To be content is a very important, valuable state for people who do Buddhist practice, mindfulness practice. To learn to be content with having few wishes. When we want all the time – we want and want and want – then there can be strong discontent. But to have few wishes and just be happy and content with what we have can provide a very satisfying state of being. It can also provide a very positive state to be available for the wonderful things in our life. If we're discontented and always want more and more different things, we might not be available to really appreciate what we do have and what is good here.

There's a wonderful story that I have told many different ways. Recently, I read the version by Paulo Coelho. It goes something like this. There was a fisherman who would get up early in the morning and go out to sea to fish. Each day, he would catch enough fish to bring back for his family to eat and would sell a few fish for things they needed. He would come back mid-morning and then play with his children on the beach. In the afternoon, he would go home and take a siesta with his wife. In the evening, he would spend a few hours in the village square with his friends, talking and having a nice time.

The fisherman did that for a long time. Then one day, a very successful businessman came by and noticed how the fisherman was living his life. The businessman said, "It'd be pretty easy for you to take out a loan and get a boat. There's a lot more fish out there you could catch. You could spend a few more hours of the day fishing. You'd be able to pay back the loan quickly and then buy a bigger boat."

The fisherman said, "Why should I do that?"

The businessman said, "Well, you would have more money. You could buy a fleet of boats and hire people to work. Pretty soon, you'd have enough money to start a company. You could have an international headquarters near your village and run a huge conglomerate fishing and selling fish. After many years, you will be able to

retire and then you can enjoy yourself. You can just get up in the morning, go fish for a few fish, come back and play with your children on the beach, hang out with your wife in the afternoon and your friends in the evening.”

The fishermen said, “Well, that’s what I’m doing already. Why should I wait until I retire?”

So, to be content with what we have is partly the theme of the story. When we do that, it allows for something profound to happen for us. Contentment opens the doors to the practice: to see ourselves deeply; to move deeper and deeper through layers of contentment, joy, peace, and happiness; to move through layers of letting go; to move through layers of discontent, suffering, greed, and desires.

One of the advantages and important aspects of meditation is that as we settle and get quieter and more concentrated, we start seeing aspects of our inner life that are not available when we are running around discontent in our everyday life, taking care of things and doing things. We start seeing the deeper levels of healthy and unhealthy discontent, the deeper layers of places of holding, clinging, and fear that we’re living by, and then we let go. As we do so, we start feeling deeper and deeper layers of freedom, happiness, contentment, and peace.

This whole world of contentment and discontent has a lot to do with the world of desires. The classic language in Buddhism is that people who practice should be content with having few desires: desires for practice, to be free, to help the world – but maybe not a desire for expensive cars and expensive homes. It’s possible to have too many desires. In this modern world, for some of us, it’s astounding the many things there are to do and acquire. It can be stressful to live in a world of so much temptation. So, to have few desires.

But then, there is a whole other layer. As this world of contentment and discontent gets more settled, peaceful, and quiet, it opens – like coming down through the spout of the funnel – to a whole other world of being available to what the world is about – being available to a cool breeze against our cheek, the colors of green of the trees, sipping tea and enjoying oneself. Being available for meditation. Being available for honesty about what’s really happening here for us. As we become more mindful, being available to truth-telling, “Oh, this is what’s happening.” Having enough contentment to be quiet and settled enough, to start being more honest about what is here, being available for the truth, being available to see what is not true.

So as we navigate and find our way in this world of contentment and discontent, we begin seeing where there are possibilities for healthy contentment and where we might get caught in unhealthy contentment. We start seeing where healthy discontent is, and where unhealthy discontent is. We start finding some freedom from the incessant desires that can keep us discontented in useless ways. Then there can be a settling and a quieting, and contentment with how things are.

Imagine standing in a long line at a government agency to get something like your driver’s license. There’s nowhere for you to go because you have to stand in line. Imagine being content because being discontented there is just a waste of time. Being discontented serves no purpose. It doesn’t make things go faster or help you feel more healthy and happy. To be available for contentment with what is when that’s the best alternative. To know how to let go of desires and wanting things to be different when that’s not really what’s possible. To learn how to be content with what is when what is is actually quite wonderful. Maybe what is is more wonderful than what you’re striving for if you’re striving for wealth and fame – all kinds of things.

I’d encourage you to spend the day looking at your relationship to contentment and discontent. Perhaps, you can begin to appreciate the greater range of ways that contentment can be healthy and the healthy ways of being discontent. And in the process of doing that, find yourself more settled and available for this world, available for your practice, available for yourself.

So this pairing of two different states will be the theme for the week. Tomorrow will be gladness and sadness. Thank you.