Contentment

February, 2001

One of the important principles in starting out in concentration practice is learning how to start out small. You’re given one thing to look at—the breath. And most people will look at it for a little while and they’ll say, “Well, what’s next?” And the answer is, “Well, the breath is next. The next breath, and the next breath, and the next one.” This is related to the principle of contentment. Learning how to be content with one object. Keep reminding yourself that this is what the Buddha was focused on the night of his awakening, focused on the breath. And everything he needed to know in order to gain awakening was present right here when the mind was present at the breath. So even though you haven’t reached that point in your breathing yet, in your comprehension of the breath or your comprehension of the mind, still you know that you’re at the right spot. And you have to keep reminding yourself of that. Reminding yourself that this is a good object to be with. It’s a good object to get to know thoroughly. Because if you can’t stay with one object like this for long periods of time, well, what is your life? You just go through your life making quick sketches of this, quick sketches of that, and never really get to know anything in any depth. So if you’re going to choose one thing to get to know in depth, the breath is the best thing. Because on the one hand, it’s good. It’s good for the body. When the mind is in alignment with the breath, it can help each other along. You begin to notice ways that you’ve been breathing in the past that are not all that helpful. You may be tense here or tight there, getting tense as you breathe in, holding on to tension as you breathe out, or else trying to push things out too much. When the quality of the breathing isn’t good, it’s bound to have an effect on the body. At the same time, the breath can be a mirror for the mind. The least little thing happens in the mind, and it gets reflected in the way you breathe, in the way the energy flows in your body. If you’re sensitive to that energy flow, you’re going to be right on top of things. So it gives you a good vantage point, both using the breath to soothe the body, to make the body more healthy, and at the same time to soothe the mind and allow the mind to get to know itself. Because there’s so much in the mind, there’s so much ignorance in the mind about its own self, all those hidden corners and closed rooms in the mind. As the breath gets more soothing, the mind begins to open up to the present moment. It begins to open up to itself as well. So keep reminding yourself to be content with what we’ve got right here. Just focus on this one little thing, the breath coming in and going out. And as you get to know it, you begin to realize that there’s a lot there. When we talk about contentment, it doesn’t mean that you sort of sit there and do nothing and say, “Well, everything is fine, just as it is.” That’s not the kind of contentment we’re talking about. Contentment here means having just a few tools and learning to content yourself with learning how to be skillful with them. So many skills in life grow out of this, the fact that you have only one or two tools, and so you’ve got to learn how to use them in lots of ways. You need to develop unexpected skills. People who have too many things at hand end up not having any skills at all. They have this, they have that. They don’t have to worry about mastering this, because the tools are electric anyhow, and they just do the job for them. As a result, they end up not being all that skillful in things. And they’re really at a loss, say, when the electricity goes out or when they’re caught without a full collection of tools. So we’ve got the breath, and so we’ve got to learn how to use it in ways that we might not expect. How to soothe the body, how to energize the body, how to soothe the mind, how to energize the mind. The potential is all right here. John Lee’s example for contentment is someone who starts out with one banana tree and wants to have a banana orchard. There are two ways of doing that. One is to go and borrow a lot of money and then buy a lot of banana trees and plant them all at once. Often you find that you’ve got just too much to handle. If drought comes, all your banana trees die, and then you’re done for, because you borrowed somebody else’s money. Now you’ve got to pay them back, and you have no means to pay them back. The other way is you start out with one banana tree, and you get the seeds from the banana, and they have bananas with seeds in them. You plant those, and you get more banana trees. Those come out with seeds, you have more banana trees. So from one banana tree, you get a whole orchard. In other words, you learn to cultivate what you’ve got. Don’t go worrying about how long it’s going to take or how fast the results will appear or how big they’ll get. Just take what you’ve got and learn how to develop it, learn how to cultivate it. Tend it in the direction you want it to go. That’s what we mean by contentment. You sit down, what have you got here? You’ve got the body, you’ve got the mind, you’ve got the breath. That’s really all you need. After all, the Buddha said the purpose of our practice is to learn what he called fabrication, which is sankhara and pali. There are three big types. There’s bodily fabrication, mental fabrication, and verbal fabrication. The interesting thing is that when the mind is concentrated on the breath, all three of those are right here. Bodily fabrication is the breath itself, because it’s the factor that keeps the body going, adjusts the energy flow. Without the breath, the body would fall apart. So that’s right here. Verbal fabrication is directed thought and evaluation. Those are two of the factors of the first jhana. You keep directing your attention to the breath, and then you evaluate it. Is it comfortable? If it’s not comfortable, you can change it. Try longer breathing. Try shorter breathing. Try deeper breathing. Try more shallow breathing. Once you’ve got a comfortable sensation of the breath, then give it some sort of spreading out through the body. Learn to savor the comfort that comes from the breath. Again, that’s an aspect of contentment. All this comes under evaluation, which is all verbal. Because you will be actually thinking, “How about this? How about that?” The mind will form words. And then finally there’s mental fabrication, which is feeling and perception. You’ve got the physical feelings that arise with regard to the breath, the mental feelings of happiness or sadness or equanimity that come along with the breathing, and then there’s perception, which labels things. Well, your main labeling job here right now is labeling the type of breath, labeling the type of feeling. It’s all here. These are all the things you need for awakening—the breath, directed thought, evaluation, feeling, and perception. So you don’t have to go looking anywhere else. Just focus on what you’ve got right here and allow it to grow. You can’t be too impatient. Otherwise, you’re like the farmer who plants little rice plants and knows that they’re going to have to be several feet tall before they’re going to bring rice. So he pulls the little rice plants up to the level where they should be to give rice. Well, what’s going to happen is they get uprooted and they die. You start out with those little one-inch tall rice plants and then you cultivate them. You look after them. Give them fertilizer. Give them water when they need it. Make sure bugs don’t come and eat them up. And as you look after them, they’ll grow. And what starts out looking like grass eventually will give rise to rice that you can eat. But you can’t be impatient. But at the same time, you can’t be lazy. So that’s what contentment is. You take what you’ve got and then you make the most of it. You don’t worry about how far it’s going to take you or how fast. I always think it’s fascinating to read about the various reform movements in Buddhism in Thailand in the beginning of the century. And the one that was most successful, the Thai forest tradition, started out with people who had very little formal education, if any at all. They were farmers in one of the most backward parts of Thailand. These were the people who knew, “Well, we’ve got a lot of work to do.” They didn’t have the advantages of the princes and other wealthy people who lived in the capital, who were working on their own reforms. And it’s because the people who were wealthy and well-educated figured, “Well, we know this. We know that. We can go straight to the upper levels.” They never got anywhere. So it was the forest tradition, a group of peasants, peasants’ sons, who said, “Okay, we’ve got a long task ahead of us. We’ve got to work from the very beginning, step by step by step, to get to where we want to go.” Those are the ones who ended up becoming the most respected monks in Thailand. So think about that when you’re tempted to wonder, “Well, what’s the next step? I’ve had enough of this. Let’s go on to the next one.” You haven’t had enough of it. Stay with the breath and see how things develop. We’re not here just to make quick sketches. We’re here to get to know something in detail. One thing. That’s all you have to know. If you know the breath and all the other mental factors that surround it as you’re concentrating on it and watching it carefully, that’ll take care of everything that you need to know for the mind, everything you need to do for the mind. It’s all centered right here. It’s simply a question of allowing it to develop. Cultivating it, training it when need be, and otherwise just letting it grow. That’s what we mean when we talk about contentment in the practice.

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