Contentment

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We’re following a path. It doesn’t go physically anywhere. It’s a path in the mind. The premise is that we start out, we’re not where we want to be in the mind. And when we’re done, we’ll be there. Same place, but it’ll be a different place when we’re done. There’s something about human nature that doesn’t like that idea. We don’t like to be already where it is, where it wants to be. The idea that we have to strive, that we have to make an effort, goes against our defilements. So it’s amazing, if you look at 2,500 years of Buddhist history, how many times people have tried to deny the idea of a path. People who reject the Buddhist teachings entirely, other people who say they’re Buddhist, but keep on trying to find some way around the path. “I have to accept things as they are,” they say, “and you’ll be fine.” As a John Cha once said, “That’s the equanimity of a water buffalo.” Water buffaloes are not smart. They’re not wise. There are things that you learn how to accept and be content with, but there are a lot of things that the Buddha said you cannot be content with, because there is suffering in the mind. No matter how many conceptual edifices you build up, if the suffering is still there, you haven’t solved the problem. The Buddha said there is a possibility of no more suffering. When he says he teaches suffering and the end of suffering, do you really believe him? Some people say there’s a wisdom in learning how to accept the fact, “Well, this is part of being a human being. This is what we’ve got to learn how to put up with.” But that’s not the vision that the Buddha offers. If this were all that we had, then there would be some wisdom in learning to accept it. But the Buddha said it’s not. There is that other possibility. Prince Siddhartha, everything was easy. He was young, good-looking, he had all these dancing maidens, three palaces, one each for the different seasons of the year. He was in line for the throne, and yet he still wasn’t satisfied. Not because he wanted more wealth, but because he realized that wealth doesn’t answer the question of this hunger in the human heart. His friends and his father’s advisors all said, “Look, this is as good as it gets. Learn to accept it.” And the young prince said, “No, there must be something noble to search for.” So that’s what the next six years of his life were. There was a search involving all kinds of blind alleys, and a lot of effort and a lot of hardship. He finally found the path. But it was because he had that determination that he wasn’t just going to accept things as they are, particularly not accept the suffering of the mind. Part of life is learning to accept external conditions as they are. You’ve got to put up with all kinds of people, all kinds of problems, lacking this, lacking that. That’s something the Buddha said. You get over the defilements of the mind through learning tolerance, through learning contentment. When it’s hot, you put up with the heat. When it’s cold, you put up with the cold. Whatever food, clothing, shelter you get, you learn to be content with that. But in terms of the mind, he said, you do not tolerate unskillful thoughts. When they come up to the mind, you’ve got to find some way to get around them. Anything in the mind that causes suffering within, you’ve got to work on that. And even though the end of the path is to put an end to desire, you have to learn how to use your desire for freedom from suffering. You can’t just deny your desire because it goes underground. You can’t deny your suffering because you start blinding yourself to what’s actually happening. And also you’re cutting off all possibility of finding if there’s something better. So it’s important that you learn this distinction between external contentment and internal contentment. Being content with external things is a wise part of the practice. Not tolerating unskillful mental states is also a wise part of the practice, because that’s what makes the real difference. So this is where you focus your energy and look at the mind. What is the mind doing that’s causing suffering? What could it do to cause less suffering? Now, to see this clearly, you’ve got to get the mind very, very still. In whatever way you get the mind to settle down in the present moment, clearly, with mindfulness and alertness. Try to develop those skills within the mind. Develop those states within the mind. And keep at it. As the Chan Fung once said, if you want to be good at the meditation, you’ve got to be crazy about the meditation. It has to be something that really intrigues you, captures your imagination, so that you find that the mind in all of its spare moments is there with the breath, there with whatever your meditation object is. Once you give the mind this kind of direction, then you begin to see a lot more clearly where the defilements of the mind are. People who just kind of wander around aimlessly don’t have any defilements. The mind just kind of goes with the natural flow. Because as long as there’s no one particular direction, you have no left or right or forward or backwards. Everything seems to be forward simply because you’re facing in that direction. It’s like somebody swirling around in the whirlpools of a river or the whirlpools of a pond. You don’t go anywhere. You have no sense of forward or backward because you don’t have any particular goal in mind. But once you have a goal in mind, all of a sudden there’s a left and a right and an up and a down and a forward and a back. That’s when you begin to see how the mind wanders off and creates suffering. That’s how some states of mind get in the way of where you’re going, and other states of the mind help. Once you have that sense of direction, the internal path becomes a lot clearer. That’s where you have to be very, very scrupulous. You’re not allowing the states that pull you back to take over. There’s one other element, though, that the Buddha said not to tolerate. If you find yourself hanging out with people who pull you off the path, you just don’t want to hang out in that kind of fellowship, that kind of companionship. You have to have a strong sense. That state of your mind is very, very precious. Lack of food, lack of clothing, lack of shelter do not pull you off the path, but wrong views do pull you off the path. That’s one area in the external world where you have to be very, very careful. Otherwise, the main issues are inside. Make sure you have a strong sense of direction. As the image in the text says, it’s like a man whose head or turban is on fire. You do everything you can to put out that fire. You don’t just wait around and learn how to love the fire or have a nice equanimous attitude towards the fire, because it’s going to burn your head. So be selective in your contentment. Remember, the Buddhist teachings are not a teaching of zero intolerance. Some things you tolerate, some things you don’t. In every aspect of the path, the question is, when is it skillful to tolerate something and when is it not? It’s the question of skill. That should be uppermost in every consideration. you

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