Adult Contentment

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There’s been a trend in recent years in Dharma books printed largely in Asia, illustrated with little cartoons. Little baby monks, little baby girls sitting and meditating. The implication being that Buddhism is something for kids. It’s a reversion to a time when you were a child and everything was easy. Everything was innocent, everybody was nice, everything was safe and happy. It drives me up the wall. Look at the Buddha. He went off into the forest, faced a lot of dangers, and had to be really an adult. In other words, he took responsibility for his actions. He was willing to admit his mistakes. He learned to accept what had to be accepted so he could focus on what didn’t have to be accepted. In other words, what has to be accepted is the fact that the world is imperfect. What doesn’t have to be accepted is the fact that the mind is creating suffering for itself. So you focus on the latter problem and you learn to put the other problem aside. This is why the Brahmaviharas have four Brahmaviharas. It’s not just metta. It’s cohorts, i.e., compassion and empathetic joy. There’s also got to be equanimity. There are some things you have to bear with, some things you simply have to accept. That’s the way it is, and it’s going to have to stay that way. And if you spend all your time straightening that out, you never get the real job done. Because the real job is the suffering we’re causing ourselves. That’s something we actually can change, something we can work on. The Buddha made a distinction between things that we should be content with and things we should not be content with. The things we should be content with are our outside surroundings. In particular, there are two big things that the Buddha pointed out. One is painful feelings. Painful feelings can come from simply that it’s cold or it’s hot, or from wounds or diseases. You take medicine for the disease, you treat the wounds, but there’s going to be some pain there. And you learn to live with it. In fact, as you learn how to deal with it, you can gain a lot of insight into your own mind. And as for hurtful words, he says, on the one hand, it’s simply the fact that you have an ear. You’ve got a body that is making you subject to not only physical wounds but also to wounds of words. Your ears are there. They pick up sounds. And other people have the right to say all kinds of things. There are going to be hurtful words in the world, and there are going to be kind words. There are going to be words spoken with good intentions, spoken with intentions that are not so good. That’s just the normal way of human speech. If you go around trying to legislate that people can only say nice things that don’t threaten you in even minor, minor ways, then you’re not paying attention to the real problem, which is that if you learn how to deal with sounds and deal with hurtful words, in other words, see where you’re causing the pain to yourself, then you can really solve the problem. Because there’s no way you can legislate the whole world, or even just a small community, where everyone’s going to have to say nice things to one another. Because what often happens is everybody’s saying nice things, but they’re not thinking nice things. Then there’s going to be a lot of passive aggression going on. So you realize the problem isn’t out there. The problem is in here. And this is what it means to be an adult, to realize where the real problem is and to put other irritating things aside. Learn to accept that that’s where they’re going to be. And you focus on what you’re responsible for, which is the fact that when a sound comes in, you use it to stab your heart. When pains come in the body, you use them to stab the heart. Why are you doing that? This is why we practice meditation, to see why we’re doing that and also learn how we don’t have to do that, so we can get the mind still. The Buddha said that the secret to his awakening was, on the one hand, firm persistence, and on the other, not being content with skillful qualities. In other words, whatever level of skill you have, if it’s not all the way there to the end of the path, don’t just sit around and accept, “Well, that’s the way things are.” You’re sitting here, focusing on the breath. Distractions come up. You don’t just accept the distractions. You accept the fact that there’s a distraction there, but you don’t resign yourself to it. The next step is to figure out what you do with it. How can you drop the distraction? Or if your concentration isn’t firm, what do you do to make it more firm? You fall into the duties of the Four Noble Truths. You try to develop the path. So as you’re focused on the breath, what can you do to make it easier to stay here? This is going to be an individual matter. Some people find that focusing just on one point is all they need for the time being. Other people find that that doesn’t keep their attention really filled. So you try to fill the whole body with your breath, fill the whole body with your awareness. You go through the body section by section to get acquainted with it. And then finally settle down and say, “Okay, I’m going to stay in this one spot, but I’m going to spread my awareness out from that spot.” So you can develop an all-around sense of awareness that you can see what’s going on in the mind. The more things get still in the body and the more your focus gets still, the more there are little things that move around in the mind. You notice them. In the past, they were just part of the background, like the sun. So if there’s a stereo playing in the room, you don’t even hear the refrigerator at all, especially if the stereo is loud. But you turn it down, turn it down, turn it down, finally get it so that it’s still. Then you can hear the sound of the refrigerator. It’s the same here. As your surface level of objects of the mind begins to get still, you get focused on one thing, and that one thing gets very, very still. Then little things come up in the mind. You see those little voices in the mind that complain about what somebody said, or complain about the pain, or complain about the weather, or complain about whatever. That complaining is directed thought and evaluation, but it’s directed in the wrong way, and it’s evaluating the wrong way. You want to learn how to direct your inner conversation in a new direction, i.e., why are you talking in that way to yourself? Why can’t you talk in another way? Because that way of talking to yourself, the old way of talking to yourself, just keeps stabbing you with more pain. Why isn’t this that way? Why isn’t that this way? And you’re talking about things you cannot change about human nature outside, things you can’t change about the world outside, the fact that you’ve got a body, you’ve got ears. These things open you up to unpleasant things outside. The fact that we have a body means that we’re subject to all kinds of stuff, starting from germs on up. The fact that we have ears means that we’re going to be hearing things. You’re not going to stop those things, but what you can stop is the inner chatter about these things that is unskillful. So we train the mind to think about the breath and evaluate the breaths, to give it a better way to talk to itself, and also to focus on the breath. The problem is inside. I know of an abbot of a monastery who eventually left the monastery because he said the people weren’t really interested in the Four Noble Truths. They just wanted to have meetings to straighten out the monastery. The monastery was running perfectly fine, but they kept having more and more insistent ideas, “Well, this has to be that way, that has to be this way, otherwise we’re not going to be happy.” And as he rightly pointed out, that’s not the approach of the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths turns around and says, “What are you doing? That’s creating your own suffering.” Focus on dealing with that problem. And as you’re focused on that, if the situation allows you to do that, then you’ve got a good situation. I mean, there are places in the world where it’s very difficult to do that. Here at the monastery, it may not be perfect, but we have time to meditate on the basic values of the place. And developing the mind. Some material needs are met, and it’s a good place to practice. It may not be perfect, but then if you’re waiting for the perfect place to practice, you’re never going to practice. Because this inner child of the mind has this ability to find fault with all kinds of things, even as things get better and more comfortable, to find more things to find fault with. So realize that that path leads nowhere. You turn around and focus on the path that leads someplace. Again, this is an adult decision. All of the Buddhist teachings are to make us adults and to appeal to the adult side within us, to develop that. So we take responsibility for our actions, responsibility for our happiness, both in the sense that we will do what is needed for true happiness, and we’ll look for happiness in a way that doesn’t cause harm to anyone, ourselves or anyone else. To be clear on the distinction between where you should be content and where you should be discontented, you should be contented about the fact that here’s a place we can practice. You should be able to deal with unpleasant words as they come up. You should be able to deal with physical pains as they come up, because those are going to be inevitable in any practice. Where the discontent should lie in is, why is the mind still suffering? What is it doing? What level of skill have we developed? What higher level of skill can we develop beyond that? That’s where your energy should be focused. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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