Joy & Discontent

February 22, 2025

There’s a passage where the Buddha says that when you see that you’ve done something right, you managed to say something or think something or do something that didn’t harm anybody, you should take joy in that fact and continue training. But there’s another place where he says that the secret to his awakening was discontent with his skillful qualities. In other words, as long as he hadn’t attained the deathless happiness that he was looking for, he wouldn’t rest content. So which is it? And the answer, of course, is both. Knowing the right time and the right place to encourage yourself and knowing the right time and place to come down hard on yourself. That’s a skill and it’s an important part of the practice. And you notice that when the Buddha is telling you to encourage yourself, to take joy in when you’ve done something right, he says you don’t stop there. You keep on training. That’s what it means to be discontent. In other words, you know you’ve done something well and you want to tell yourself, “Yes, you did that well, but you don’t let yourself stop there.” And Chan Phuong once said he was afraid to praise people about their practice because often they would just stop, thinking they were good enough. That’s one of the reasons I almost never got any praise from him. His attitude was, “You can always do better, but you have to take joy in the fact that you’re making progress. Otherwise you get discouraged. If there’s no joy in doing things right, then when the critical things come, when you see you’ve done something wrong, you just dump on yourself. That’s not helpful. You need to train your inner voices to have a sense of time and place. Think of the Buddha’s strictures for the kind of words he would speak. First they would have to be true. Then they have to pass the next checkpoint, which is, are they beneficial? And if they’re true but not beneficial, he wouldn’t say them. If they were true and beneficial, then the next checkpoint was, is this the right time and place to be critical or to be encouraging? Three checkpoints. Most of us don’t do any checkpoints at all. Whatever pops in our mind just comes out. And if it doesn’t come out of our mouth, it just keeps running around inside the mind. Think about how much work we had to put in to learn language when we were small. Then look what it does to us. It turns around and it criticizes us inside. Tells us we have to worry about this, worry about that. Tells us that we’re wrong about this, wrong about that. We’re no good in this. We’re no good in that. It’s like Pandora’s box. Language is coming and taking over our brains. Oftentimes it doesn’t have much to keep it under control. This is one of the parts of the meditation. We’re talking about getting the mind under control. And part of it is just staying focused on the breath. Having a sense of being with that sensation and not wandering off. But an important part of the meditation is also how you talk to yourself. It’s called directed thought and evaluation. That’s part of right concentration. And even before right concentration, it’s how you talk to yourself throughout the path. People sometimes come and say,”How do I do this directed thought and evaluation?” Well, you’re doing it all the time. You pick up a topic and then you comment on it. Or another topic and comment on it. Or you just circle around one particular topic, which may or may not be useful. And that inner voice, or those many inner voices, can really harass you. So you’ve got to get a sense of control. Lay down some laws. And the good laws are the ones I mentioned just now. It has to be true. It has to be beneficial. It has to be at the right time and place. And if the inner voices don’t abide by those rules, they may keep on chattering, but you just decide, “I’m not going to listen.” “Wherever this inner voice came from, I don’t have to trust it.” Here again you bring out that five-step program that the Buddha would recommend for dealing with anything going on in the mind. To see its origination. What’s propelling it? So you’ve got this sense in the mind that you have to worry about things. If you don’t worry about things, everything’s going to fall apart. Well, question that attitude. First bring it out. Sometimes it operates behind the scenes. Because it knows that if you actually listen to what it had to say, it’d be pretty stupid. Say there’s an asteroid coming to the earth. Well, worrying about it is not going to change its course. There’s this kind of magical thinking that if I worry enough about something, it’ll go away. That’s not true. Or if I worry about it enough, I’ll be prepared for it. That’s not true either. The way you prepare for things in the future is to focus on what skills you can develop. In the present, in terms of mindfulness, alertness, urgency. So you’ll be able to think quickly and on your feet when something unexpected happens in the future. All too often we’re told to focus on the present moment for its own sake. It’s a wonderful moment, or it’s the only moment there is. But the Buddha never said that. All the cases where he talks about focusing on the present have to do with getting prepared for the present. The fact you’re going to die, and you need to get the work done that needs to be done. About what you’re going to have to let go. What choices you’ll be prepared to make. How to develop the mindfulness you need. How to develop the discernment you’ll need. So as the time comes to leave this body, and options are open to you, you want to choose the right options. At the very least, there’s a place where you can practice, and meet up with the true Dhamma and practice it. So you’re in the present for the sake of the future. So you keep reminding yourself, this is where the real work is done. But it’s not for the sake of being here. It’s for the sake of dealing with whatever’s going to come up in the future as well. I mean, you are creating a sense of well-being right now. And that sense of well-being is not the end in and of itself. It’s part of learning how to do the work well. It’s also part of learning how to step out of the voices of your mind. Because when you can stay with a sense of the breath, as a purely physical sensation, you can pull out of all those chat rooms inside the mind. Get some rest. And see them from the outside. That’s the important thing. As long as you identify with the voices inside, the ones that are critical, or the ones who say the wrong thing at the wrong time, they’re going to run your life. But you have to be able to step out and say, this is not what I want. It’s not true, or it’s not beneficial, or this is not the right time. I’ve got something better. And you work on developing your mindfulness and your alertness and your ardency right now. Because those are the tools you’re going to need. We’re talking about doing these things, developing these qualities to put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. But we’re also developing these qualities so that when you do have to deal with the world, you’ll be able to deal with the world in a wise way. You can see the world best when you’ve been able to step out of it. That includes not only the world outside, but the world of your mind and the worlds of your mind. So establish some rules of order inside the mind. This doesn’t mean you’ll be able to stop the voices in the mind right away. But it does mean that you can learn how not to take them seriously. If they’re going to chatter, have them chatter in the other corner of the room. You’re in this corner of the room where you’re going to do some work, the work that needs to be done, right? And yes, when you do it well, take joy. That’s an important rule for dealing with anything unskillful in the mind. When you can finally get past it, even if it’s just temporarily, notice how good it feels. Notice that you’re able to do this. Because there will be part of the mind that comes back and says, “Well, you can do it only temporarily.” Or, “It doesn’t really count.” And if you don’t have a positive voice inside to counteract that, what are you going to do? You’re going to succumb to the negative voice. So learn to develop some positive voices inside. Learn to have confidence in the practice, confidence in yourself, that this is something good to do and you can get good at it. And it keeps on getting better and better. That’s how you can take joy at the same time that you are discontent. In other words, you recognize your progress. Recognize also the fact that you haven’t reached the goal. But you don’t beat yourself up over that. Take joy in the fact that you’re progressing. And you want to keep on progressing. And the paradox between taking joy and being discontent will disappear.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2025/250222_Joy_&_Discontent.mp3>