Worthy of the Dhamma

January 7, 2022

The theme of contentment plays a large role in the Buddhist teachings. It’s the main focus of the customs of the Noble Ones, and it’s one of what the Buddha called “thoughts of a great person,” that this Dhamma is a Dhamma for those who are content. The story goes that Venerable Aniruddha, by that time, was probably a stream-enterer. He was in seclusion and started thinking about the Dhamma he had discovered. To at least some extent, he wasn’t fully awakened. He realized that this Dhamma is for a person who is modest, not a person who is self-aggrandizing. It’s for someone who is content, not for someone who is discontent. It’s for someone who is reclusive. It’s for someone whose persistence is aroused, not for someone who is lazy. It’s for someone whose mindfulness is established, not for someone whose mindfulness is confused. It’s for someone who is concentrated, not for someone who is discerning. The Buddha read Aniruddha’s mind and disappeared from where he was and appeared right in front of Aniruddha. He commended him for thinking what he called the “thoughts of a great person.” Then he added one more. This Dhamma is for someone who is taking delight in non-objectification, not for someone who delights in objectification. And he encourages Aniruddha to keep on practicing. He was on the basis of that teaching that Aniruddha would eventually become an arahant. He said, “You have to be worthy of it, but you can make yourself worthy of it by developing these qualities.” We live in a consumer culture where so much emphasis is placed on making the product worthy of our attention, worthy of our buying it. And some people come to the Dhamma thinking, “Well, make the Dhamma something I would want to buy.” But here the Buddha is saying, “No, this is the sort of thing where you have to make yourself worthy of it. If you’re going to get anywhere near it.” But the qualities that he talks about are things that can be developed. You look in yourself and you realize that you are modest. You’re not here to show off to anybody. You are content with what you’ve got in terms of food, clothing, shelter, medicine. You’re not entangled with a lot of people. And you’re not out seeking to get an angle. You’re happy to be by yourself looking into your mind. And if you have those qualities, you’ve got enough to get started on the big ones, which are basically right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, right discernment. With right effort, you look at the qualities of your mind. If your mind is thinking in ways that are not right, you don’t just continue that way. You remind yourself, “Whatever traumas I’ve had in the past, I don’t have to be defined by them. I don’t have to let my mind swirl around them. I can be the author of my destiny.” So you do your best to undercut any thoughts that you know are unskillful and to develop those that are skillful. And you do that by being mindful. Here, mindfulness means being able to remember what was said and done a long time ago, and it’s useful in reminding you how to give rise to skillful thoughts and how to undercut unskillful ones, how to stay alert, mindful, ardent, so you can get the mind at the right concentration, get it to settle down, have a sense of really belonging here. And the fact that you’ve developed some modesty and some contentment and are not concerned about getting entangled with people. There’ll be fewer and fewer things to disturb the mind. And if you find thoughts of that sort are disturbing the mind, you say, “Well, I’ve got some more work to do in those areas.” But it’s work you can do. And as you deal with what the Buddha calls the grosser defilements of concentration, then you get to the more refined ones. So you can develop the kind of discernment that, as the Buddha said, is penetrative, sees into arising and passing away in a penetrative, noble way. Penetrative here means not just watching things coming and going, but understanding why they’re coming, why they’re going. In other words, what’s the allure for them to come? At what point does the mind stop being fascinated by the allure and let them go? As you see, gradations are some things that you do want to maintain. After all, you do have to maintain the path. It is something that you put together. And again, see very clearly for yourself what the Buddha said about what’s skillful and what’s unskillful really is true. You have the energy to get rid of the unskillful thoughts. That right there, given the fact that Ananda Buddha stopped at that point, would be enough for stream-entry. You work on those qualities and they’ll take you far. So when you find that you have the qualities already, take heart, that you’re well on your way to becoming a person worthy of the Dhamma, and keep focused on the qualities where you can still do some more work. As for delighting in non-objectification, remember, that’s bapanca. It’s objectification. Nipapanca is non-objectification. Objectification is kind of thinking where you start with the thought of who you are, “I am the thinker,” thinking these thoughts. And then from there you go on to developing more and more states of coming. So we look into the process. How does that sense of “I am the thinker” develop? As the Buddha said, it starts with craving. It could be craving for sensuality, or craving for an identity in a world of experience, or craving to snuff out the identity you already have. And you want to look into where in the world in those processes the sense of “I” begins to form. This is the opposite of what you sometimes hear. People sometimes say it’s because of your sense of “I” that you have desire and that leads to suffering. But as the Buddha said, it’s the desire that comes first, and then there’s the “I” that begins to develop around it. The “I” who will enjoy getting whatever the object of craving is, and the “I” who is able to go about finding that and getting it. And wherever that sense of becoming is found, that’s where there’s going to be suffering. So look into the process. When a desire comes, where does the “I” begin to form around it? And you’ve worked on your desires for material things to be a certain way, through your contentment, your desire to be known by other people. You’ve worked on that through your development of modesty, your desire to get involved with other people. Those right there are three big ways of beginning to attain the “I” if you develop these qualities of modesty, contentment, and reclusiveness. In this way, you’re just further developing that process of the mind that says, “Do I really need this ‘I’?” “These desires that I’m working on, that I’m generating here, do I really need them?” And part of the mind will say, “Yes, of course. Without them, how would I get anything at all in the world?” This is where we have the Four Noble Truths in the background. As the Buddha said, there is a greater happiness that comes from developing dispassion for your cravings. How about trying that? He says it is a possibility. He says it’s a truth. For those of us who haven’t gotten anywhere near there yet, it’s just a possibility. It’s just a belief, a possibility. But as you work on these qualities of modesty, contentment, and reclusiveness, you’re beginning to confirm that there is a sense of ease that comes. You’re beginning to get rid of a lot of your desires. So maybe the Buddha was right. Give him a chance. But above all, work on those qualities of mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. Work on those first, because those will give you a good foothold. Otherwise, we swim through the oceans of life and there doesn’t seem to be any sense of shore anywhere near. Just currents flowing this way, currents flowing that way. You look at the lives of the people in this world, and this is just the human level, you can see there’s a lot of suffering. Do you want to keep on coming back to that? There are a lot of people who have suffered a lot more than you have, at least that you can remember. But you see how other societies have fallen apart? Well, that could happen here too. Are you ready? Do you have anything good to hold on to? These thoughts of a great person show you the direction on developing the qualities of mind where you give yourself something really firm and solid inside. And as you look at yourself and realize you’ve got some of those qualities already, you can take heart. Then, based on that, work on strengthening your weak points until you find something that really is of solid worth, when you’ve made yourself fully worthy of the Dhamma. And only then are you in a position to know if the Dhamma is true.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2022/220107_Worthy_of_the_Dhamma.mp3>