

# Dharmette: Contentment and Discontent

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on August 4, 2010

This morning I want to talk about contentment and also about discontent.

There was a famous Zen teacher in San Francisco named Suzuki Roshi, who once defined Buddhism with three words: "Not always so." I think it's a great expression: "It's not always so." So whatever you think, that this is the way it is, it's not always so. You can find some freedom in that. You don't latch on, or hold on, or resist in some dramatic way that this is it. Not always so.

Many times, people easily fall into the idea that this is how it is. If we talk about ideals like contentment, we think, "Oh, this is how it is." You're supposed to be content. But with many things in life, there can be situations where two different qualities co-exist in us. It's not a matter of only being content; maybe it's a healthy balance between being content and discontent. There can be areas where we're content and areas where we can be discontent in a healthy way.

There's a great line in the poetry of T.S. Eliot where he says, "Teach us to care and not to care." I think it's a beautiful thing to know how to care about things, but also how not to care – not how to be dismissive, indifferent, or callous, but rather how not to care enough to take things too personally.

If you're a parent and you're caring for your newborn baby, there's a lot of care going on, but you don't care too much that you're walking around afterwards with spit-up all over your shirt. Before, you cared a lot about wearing your best clothes. In public you wanted to look presentable, but when you're tired, what you look like and what people think about you just doesn't really matter anymore. What matters is that you're caring for your baby. So caring and not caring can co-exist.

If you're with a friend, you can care for your friend, and at the same time, you can not care whether the friend thinks you're the best thing since chocolate chip cookies. You don't have to take everything so personally. Perhaps there's a healthy way in which we don't care about our self-image. It's not about us – it's about caring for our friend.

There can be a mutual interplay of making a lot of effort in practice, and at the same time not making effort. For example, it's possible to be very diligent to stay relaxed, because the forces inside us sometimes do not feel relaxed. They can be quite powerful, and pull us into distraction, preoccupation, fear, anxiety, desires, and all kinds of things. So sometimes we have to be extremely vigilant to stay relaxed. It may sound like a paradox to be vigilantly relaxed, but sometimes that's required. It keeps you staying relaxed, but at the same time there's a lot of effort that goes into that – until at some point when the relaxed, peaceful state kicks in, and then we can just stay there in a nice way.

It's the same thing with contentment and discontent. There are healthy forms of contentment that you are encouraged to cultivate when you do Buddhist practice, and there are healthy forms of discontent to cultivate. There are unhealthy forms of contentment and unhealthy forms of discontent – so there has to be some wisdom. It's not just like, "Oh Buddhism says you have to be content," and that's the end of the story. You may have to go into the subject more deeply and differentiate between what is healthy and unhealthy, and not settle on it just being one way. There may be different things go on.

Certainly, it's easy to be discontent in a way that keeps us restless, distracted, looking into the future, and wanting other things. If you are discontent with your car, then you can spend your whole meditation period thinking how you are going to get that bigger, better, faster, shinier car. Or you can be upset: "I can't get that bigger, better car," and feel so discontented with the car you have, if you have a car. If you don't have a car, then you're discontent that you don't have a car. It can keep you restless, caught up, agitated. And perhaps, if the car you have is one that works for your life, okay, then be content with the car you have, or the transportation you have if it works for your life, and not care so much about your status. Perhaps you have a dingy, old, beat-up car and you think, "Wow, if I drive in certain neighborhoods, people will judge me as being not part of the club." Well who cares if you're part of that club? But if you feel discontented and you want this bigger, better car, and your

ego, self-image, status, or sense of power in the world is really tied to it, and you see there's clinging and attachment, then it's very healthy to be discontent with that attachment.

To hear a Buddhist teaching and then think, "Oh I'll be content. I'm just content about being filled with greed!" [laughs] "This is fine." But to be discontent with our greed or our hate is quite appropriate. "I'm not content with being this way." If anger is a frequent visitor, you don't have to be content with living a life that's often angry.

So explore how to be content. Often in Buddhism we focus on being content with what we have if what we have is enough for our wellbeing. The great model is Buddhist monastics. It may not be so obvious to us with our lifestyles, but in ancient India, the way that the Buddha designed monastic life was not a life of deprivation, but rather a life where basic human needs were cared for, but nothing more. There's supposed to be enough housing, clothing, medicine, and food to live a relatively comfortable life, but not one that's overindulgent, nor one that deprives you of those things. What's needed for a healthy amount of clothes in a variety of different weather conditions turns out to just look like an orange curtain that you wrap around you [laughs]! That's enough. That's adequate. You don't go to your high school prom wearing that orange curtain, but it's adequate for a simple life. That's the model.

What is it you actually need to be content? It's interesting to look at and analyze your own lifestyle and income, and see how much of the work that you do and the income you make is motivated by the pursuit of pleasure. Most people would say, "No, it's not the pursuit of pleasure," but if you look at the rent or the mortgage you pay for your home, perhaps you chose a house that is bigger than what you actually need. But it's enjoyable to have a house that has a backyard, or an extra room, or a nice view. And so the desire to have that view, or yard, or whatever, has to do with wanting more pleasure. There's nothing wrong with that, but it could be motivated by a certain discontent.

What happens if you are content with something much more simple? Then perhaps you wouldn't have to work so hard. Maybe it's okay to live a simpler, more relaxed life, and have more time for practice, for friends, or for service to your community.

There's a great story of Mullah Nasrudin, the Sufi wise man, who lived eating beans. Every day he ate beans. Just beans, beans, beans. His neighbor came to him and said, "You know, I feel so sorry for you eating beans all the time. Look at me: I have money; I eat good, rich food; I always have a variety of foods and drinks. It's really great. Let me tell you how you do it. We have this wonderful king in our city, and if you just go over and flatter him, be at his beck and call, then he'll shower you with money, and you can buy all this good food and have a great life." And Mullah Nasrudin said, "No, I see it differently. If I can be content with beans, then I do not have to go to the trouble to flatter the King."

To be content with little, with just enough to get by, frees us from a lot of things that we may not need and allows us to pursue other things. How to be content with having an urban meditation center where sometimes it's quite noisy outside? There are people who feel, "Oh, a meditation center should be in a very quiet neighborhood." That's certainly one attitude you can have. But for your meditation practice here, sometimes it's better to be content with what we have, and to practice with what we have.

We can look into how can we be more contented, more peaceful with what we have, and how can we be discontented with those forces of the mind that keep us agitated, restless, contracted, or resistant. We can explore how to be discontent with those, and try to overcome them, and find out how to be more peaceful. And we can explore the wonderful interplay between the practice of contentment and the practice of discontent, and how each of those can benefit us. Hopefully, Buddhist practice involves a healthy mixture of both that helps us to discover greater peace, and greater capacity for compassion and care for the world.

I hope you are content with that talk, and if not, we'll have to deal with it [laughs].