Becoming Content

**Please note: A helpful resource in exploring contentment is the book *Silent Illumination: A Chan Buddhist Path to Natural Awakening* by Guo Gu. Today’s reflection incorporates some teachings from that book, particularly Guo Gu’s instructions on dealing with underlying feeling tones.**

Today I would like to reflect on contentment. In doing so, I want to acknowledge first of all that discontent can sometimes be of value to us, for it can motivate us to change in wholesome ways. It becomes a problem when it is chronic and leads us to grasping after things and experiences that can never satisfy the heart.

What does it mean to be content? Contentment is an attitude that counters and overrides our constant tendency to grasp and chase after things and experiences. It has the flavor of being at ease–grasping nothing and lacking nothing. Contentment has an element of gratitude: we appreciate what we have and who we are, even as we acknowledge our shortcomings and imperfections. When we are content, we are able to engage fully with whatever arises, pleasant or unpleasant. In this regard, contentment is a cousin of equanimity, that precious quality of accepting life as it shows up without reacting based on our personal preferences. I would even assert that becoming content requires a certain amount of courage, for it requires getting off the treadmill of materialism and acquisition that is a feature of our culture.

Becoming content is a process and a practice that begins with curiosity. We each must explore, investigate, and become familiar both with the flavor of contentment and obstacles to it. What does contentment feel like in my heartmind and in my physical being? What gets in the way of contentment? Is it restlessness? Fear? Resentment? How do these obstacles feel and how does releasing them feel? Am I content right now, in this moment? Whether yes or no, how do I know? Where do I know? How does contentment feel, even when it is fleeting?

Exploration such as this usually provokes an encounter with our busy, chattering minds. Some of the ever-present chatter is loud and clear. But there are deeper layers to the noise in our minds that we must learn to recognize as well. Some schools of Buddhism call these “mental factors,” but a more helpful term for them is underlying feeling tones; these are more subtle than the loud and clear chatter; they are more of a mumble, a vague, half-formed but insistent hum that prods and pulls us in ways it can be difficult to identify. Indeed, they are so subtle we might not even realize we are being prodded and pulled. We can understand these underlying feeling tones as mechanisms we’ve developed, often as children, that helped us adapt and survive at one point in our life but still have a hold on us. They are akin to subtle attitudes and moods.

These underlying feeling tones exert a powerful influence on our interior world; on how we see the world and our place in it. We often bolster our underlying feeling tones with stories and images that confirm them. For example, restlessness can be an underlying feeling tone; a constant compulsion to rush to the next thing. When restlessness is present, this moment is never good enough. There is always something “out there” that is more important or better or more satisfying or more comfortable that beckons us. We are never quite comfortable in our own skin. Likewise, defensiveness can be an underlying feeling tone; a posture of always being on a hair trigger, alert to any slight and threat, whether real or not. We can spin all sorts of stories about these slights and threats that have little to do with reality. There are other flavors of these underlying feeling tones: chronic resentment or anger; a compulsion to please others at all costs; fear, to name a few. In order to become aware of these underlying feeling tones, we have to train ourselves to recognize them, accept them with unfailing good will toward ourselves, and work with them so they no longer impede the freedom of mind that is contentment. The point is not perfection; the point is to begin to soften what is ready to be softened within us.

What is ready to be softened within you today—right now? Spend a few moments relaxing into that question. Ask yourself, am I content right now? How do I know? Where do I know? Is an element of gratitude, appreciation, present? Can you identify an obstacle to feeling content in this moment? Does that obstacle serve you? Take your time with this exploration.

When you are ready, I invite you to generate metta intentions around this exploration of contentment and its obstacles using whatever words or phrases are meaningful to you. Or use the following:

May I and all beings without exception be free of the roots of discontent.

May I and all beings without exception have the courage to become content.

May I and all beings without exception know the freedom of contentment.

May and I all beings without exception freely share the fruits of contentment and gratitude.

May we and all beings without exception be free from harm and ill will.