

**Content with little, easily maintained,  
Not doing too much and lightly engaged;  
Thoughtful, with a peaceful demeanor, and  
Modest, without greed among worldly things.**

**santussako ca subharo ca  
appakicco ca sallahukavutti  
santindriyo ca nipako ca  
appagabbho kulesu ananugiddho,**

---

### **“Content with little”**

Contentment is usually talked about in our language and culture as something that one reaches, attains, or achieves. The idea seems to be that in order to be content, that is to have one’s desires met, it is necessary to work on arranging and rearranging the circumstances in the world around us until certain conditions have been obtained. I will be content once I have managed to earn enough money or acclaim, or when I meet a person with whom I can have a loving intimate relationship, or once I achieve a particular set of goals. Contentment always seems to be just around the corner, something we reach for rather than obtain.

What would it take to regard contentment instead as a skill to be learned, an attitude to be discovered, or as a mental and emotional state that can be cultivated in almost any situation? If contentment can be thought of as an equilibrium between what one wants and what is happening, then there is both an outward-facing and an inward-facing strategy one might use to bring it about. The outer approach is to change the environment to bring it into alignment with one’s wishes, and this is the standard view on the matter in modern culture. The Buddha was suggesting the perhaps radical idea that contentment might also become manifest by adjusting or adapting one’s wishes to whatever is actually happening.

Practicing contentment as a living exercise in any given moment involves simply asking the question, “Can I be content with this?” What desires, wishes, preferences, beliefs, attachments, etc. would have to be given up—RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW—in order for me to feel content with this? Perhaps the room is a bit warmer than I would like it to be. Need this be a reason for discontent? Can I learn to feel contentment as a living, present, experience, even in the face of the room being a bit warmer than I would like it to be? Or, maybe I have not earned as much money as I would like, or maybe I have not met the person I would like to meet—is there any way I might still experience a moment of authentic contentment?

In the first case contentment is an idea, an abstract concept defined in terms of a particular set of situational circumstances. In the second sense contentment is a lived experience, an embodied state of mind, an emotional attitude enacted in the present moment. Simplifying upon “content with little” we might call it “content with anything” or even, to take it a step further, merely “content.” No modifiers are needed.

Of course such a practice of contentment is not meant to have one entirely disengage from worldly affairs, acquiescing, for example, to injustice and harmfulness. But once we get the hang of it, we might just be surprised at how accessible contentment is as a lived experience in almost any situation.

**Reflection:** What does a moment of contentment actually feel like?

### **“Easily maintained”**

In a similar vein as contentment, one can practice learning how to be more easily supported or maintained on various different levels of scale. This might take the form of drawing fewer resources from our planet, by reducing one’s energy use or carbon footprint. It could mean making fewer demands upon those in our social circles for emotional support or validation. Or perhaps it could mean simply expending

less energy on the friction created from relentlessly spinning the wheels of our miscellaneous thoughts and stories.

In the Buddha's day the monastic lifestyle was designed to have as little economic impact on laypeople as possible. Indeed the word for monk, "bhikkhu," originally means "beggar." The idea was that by walking for alms only once a day after villagers and townspeople have had their breakfast, the monks would simply clean up any leftovers that might otherwise have been thrown away or fed to animals.

In what ways might a modern lay lifestyle embody the ideal of the middle path? How can we live a meaningful, engaged, life as a householder (or house-renter?) while imposing as little as possible upon our ecosystem, our community, and even upon ourselves? These are questions that might fruitfully be answered by a careful and mindful awareness of experience.

**Reflection:** How can this moment be simplified? And this one? And this one?

### **"Not doing too much"**

Here is something so many people living busy lives can explore directly as a form of ongoing meditation practice. It might even be considered a form of loving-kindness practice, since getting overwhelmed by affairs can so easily bring out the worst in ourselves and in all those with whom we interact. It is not necessarily something that can be quantified—three things at once are okay but four is too many. Rather it is a matter of experiencing a certain ease of mind while we do the things we do.

Doing one thing at a time seems to be a vanishing art, and in fact many of the situations people put themselves in do not even allow for such a unified state of mind. The busyness and confusion that so often accompanies multi-tasking takes a toll, however, and it is not usually a rewarding, or even healthy, way to use the mind. Consciousness is a precious resource, and if it is spread too thinly by trying to manage multiple factors at once, its coherence diminishes.

Again this phrase had a particular meaning in ancient India, where ideally the monks and nuns were encouraged to spend their time in practicing meditation and reflecting upon the meaning of the Dharma rather than getting caught up in worldly affairs. Of course, human nature being what it is, they very often got caught up in monastic affairs; but the ideal remained to cultivate a more simplified use of one's time.

It is worth looking closely at how this idea applies to our own lives. When does it feel like we are doing too much? If there are times when it feels refreshing to no longer do too much, what does the experience of letting go or calming down actually consist of? What are the physical sensations, the feeling tones, the more austere perceptions, the related emotional states, and the very texture of consciousness itself in such moments? As with contentment, above, "not doing too much" is more of an experience-near quality of mind than a conceptual definition based on external criteria. Try exploring that quality in your own life as various conditions and circumstances change.

**Reflection:** How much of what I do each day is really meaningful to me?

### **"Lightly engaged"**

While "not doing too much" refers to the amount of complexity we take on in our lives, being "lightly engaged" has more to do with the relationship we have to whatever we do. You can wash the dishes "heavily engaged" with annoyance at the people who soiled them, resentment that you have to be the one to clean them, longing to be somewhere else doing something else, anxiety over what you have to do tomorrow—or any number of auxiliary mental proliferations. Or you can wash the dishes "lightly engaged" with awareness of the movements of the body, the temperature of the water, the smooth textures of the cutlery surfaces. The first case is heavy with a lot of "selfing," while the other is much lighter and transparent of self.

At issue is how caught by the world we allow ourselves to become. The ideal of mindfulness practice, as the *Satipatthāna Sutta* (Discourse on the Establishment of Mindfulness) tells us, is "not clinging to

anything in the world” (*na ca kiñci loke upādiyati*). Is this something that can be practiced moment by moment, in any situation whatsoever? Yes it can.

**Reflection:** How might I loosen my hold on this moment? And this one? And this one?

### “Thoughtful”

This word for intelligence or prudence or wisdom can be taken in a number of different ways. I incline, given the context of listing moral qualities, to think of it as we do in English to mean something like being modest, mindful of others, and considerate of the setting of each moment’s experience. A thoughtful person is attuned to the situation in which he or she is embedded, noticing when a door might be held for another person, or attending to how one’s words might be received by another. It is a state of mind that indicates a high level of awareness of how we are acting, and which reveals a sensitivity and care of how what we are doing will have an impact on those around us.

Sometimes mindfulness (*sati*) practice can involve such focused awareness that we lose track of inhabiting a wider space. The term clear awareness (*sampajāna*) is sometimes teamed up with mindfulness to indicate a broader discernment of context, and perhaps we can think of thoughtfulness here as widening the scope still further to include understanding how we interact with others. I can’t help but think if we all practiced thoughtfulness as intensively as mindfulness, our relationships would be a good deal healthier.

**Reflection:** Try to be as thoughtful as possible, at all times.

### “With a peaceful demeanor”

Here is the word for peace again (*santa, santi*), applied to the sense faculties and the mind. This has to do with how we hold ourselves in the world and in the moment, of how gracefully we employ the senses to convey information from the environment surrounding us. A paintbrush held tightly and cramped in the hand will draw a line of lesser quality than one held with a firm but relaxed grip. Movement is more graceful when done in a smooth, flowing arc than the jerking motion accompanying tense and rigid muscles. In a similar way a peaceful demeanor indicates that the sensory apparatus of the mind and body are relaxed, at ease, and devoid of turmoil.

This is something that can be practiced; it is a skill to be cultivated. Try doing so at every opportunity. When you think to notice it, see if at any given moment you might relax your hold on a thought, or loosen your grip on the body, or soften the emotional tone of the moment just a bit.

**Reflection:** Consider the words of Chang Tzu: “Small understanding is cramped and busy; great understanding is broad and unhurried.”

### “Modest”

Modesty simply means refraining from building oneself up too much or putting oneself forward too much. As such it is the antithesis of pride, conceit, or what is Pali is literally called “raising the banner” of self. In modern times, it is important to make a distinction between this kind of self-promotion and what is otherwise regarded as a healthy sense of self worth or self esteem. In practice, it can be a fine line to walk.

It is okay to be confident (*saddhā*), to feel vital or energized (*virīya*), and to hold oneself in the world with dignity and self-respect (*hiri*). Such qualities are not incompatible with modesty. It is only when craving or grasping develops around a sense of self that difficulties begin to appear.

**Reflection:** Notice when you are “raising the banner” of self, and see what you can do in such moments to “lower the banner” somewhat. How does that feel in experience?

**“Without greed among worldly things”**

We are easily dazzled by the shiny things of the world, all the more so when surrounded by things that others deliberately want us to crave. In our times, perhaps more than ever, we can easily immerse ourselves in products and objects that have been specifically designed to evoke our desires. But this can also be an excellent environment for practice.

Greed is merely a mental state that emerges under certain conditions and does not arise in others. An object may be regarded with greed, with aversion, or with equanimity. See what it is like to cycle between these options, even if only as an imaginative exercise. A remarkable sense of freedom can be accessed by being in the presence of worldly things without the automatic arising of desire to possess them.

**Reflection:** Try walking through an environment (of your choice) filled with desirable objects. Notice when an impulse to wanting something arises, and when it passes away. Notice the difference. See how impermanent and constructed such cravings are?