

Simplifying Our Lives

By Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron

Many people talk of simplifying their lives, but find it hard to do. Not only are we conditioned by the society around us, but we have also bought into this conditioning at some level. This gives rise to fear of not being happy, successful, loved, or financially secure. By observing our mind in meditation, we become aware of the external conditioning and our internal fears as well as the civil war that occurs in our minds and lives when we try to simplify. One part of our mind says, "Simplicity is the way to go. It will help the environment and lead to more equitable distribution of resources on the planet." and another part says, "Are you crazy? What will other people think?" or "You won't be secure in your old age!" or "My kids won't have what all the other kids do and won't fit in with their peers."

One way to overcome this civil war is simply to identify it as civil war and press the mental pause button, breathe, and return to our compassionate motivation. Another is to remember the benefits of simplifying our lives. Here are a few advantages to contemplate:

Simplicity involves letting go of life's complications and learning to appreciate what is in front of us at any particular moment. Instead of longing for what we don't have or craving for what think we should have, we turn our attention to what is here at the moment. Thus we begin to connect at a deeper level with the people we live and work with. We have time to have a good conversation with them; we have time to become friends with ourselves. We are able to experience spring's crisp air and summer's feeling of abundance, to see the full moon in autumn and the snow in winter. We find beauty where we hadn't noticed it before.

Don't think simplifying your life entails forfeiting pleasure and security and condemning yourself to a life of sacrifice. Instead, think of the contentment that will arise in your mind, the freedom from craving and dissatisfaction that you will experience. After all, discontent arises not from lacking what we want but from the strong craving to have it.

Simplicity brings less worry, not more. We don't have to worry about having what others have, maintaining knowledge of the latest digital gadgetry, or wearing the latest style glasses. We are at peace inside ourselves. We know that the people who are our friends like us for our qualities, not because we exemplify a certain image (whatever the image of our social group happens to be at that time).

Simplicity brings more security, not less. We cease being afraid of our things being stolen or our reputation being trashed. We know that no one ever has enough money to feel completely secure, and so we are content with what we have.

By living simply, we regain our freedom to think for ourselves. Instead of allowing ourselves to be manipulated by the media into thinking we need this and that or believing that we should become what we aren't, we are free to set our own values and live by them.

We also become free from the complications of having so many choices. We usually think that having a variety of choices is freedom, but if we observe, we find that it

actually brings confusion. We go into the market “for a minute” but get stuck in front of the apples. There are so many varieties, which do we choose? The same thing happens when we go to the store with crackers or noodles. When we buy a new appliance, tool, or gadget, we can’t just sit down and use it. First have to spend hours selecting and programming all our preferences. We could be using our minds to follow the path to enlightenment, but instead our attention is enmeshed in choosing minute details that supposedly give us happiness, but in fact make us more confused.

Living simply, we no longer need a checklist. Have you noticed how glued we are to our daily checklists of things to do? We think the items on our lists are crucial and scurry around trying to finish these tasks. But the more we do, the more we have to do and our list doubles. The sad thing is that our lists seem to lack really important items such as, “Look my children in the eyes with love and listen to how their day went,” “Tell my friends how much I appreciate their good qualities,” “Be generous to those who are destitute or ill,” “Sit down and be peaceful inside my own heart,” and “Meditate on the great kindness of all.”

Living simply frees up time and energy. Consider how much you need to buy just to have the job you have. Let’s say you work in an office—you need to have certain clothes, drive a particular type of car, and see the movies your colleagues. All these things cost money. So you work hard to get the things you need to maintain your job. Quite a vicious circle. But the mental state involved with simplicity lacks the neurotic caring about what others think of us.

Living simply doesn’t mean just simplifying our environment and possessions. It really entails simplifying our ideas, opinions, and preferences. We become aware of our judgmental mind that puts others down. We notice how attached we are to our preferences and how unhappy we become when we don’t get our way. We recognize how many opinions we have about so many different topics. Slowly we let go of these and close down the internal opinion factory. The resulting silence in our minds is blissful.

Initially it may take some self-discipline to remove ourselves from the wheel of complications and desires and to overcome the fear of doing so, but when we stick to it, the joy of simplicity will gradually blossom in our lives.

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