

Right Gratitude

PALI CANON

Maha-mangala Sutta: Blessings

Thus have I heard:

On one occasion the Blessed One was living near Savatthi at Jetavana at Anathapindika's monastery. Now when the night was far advanced, a certain deity, whose surpassing radiance illuminated the whole of Jetavana, approached the Blessed One, respectfully saluted him, and stood beside him. Standing thus, he addressed the Blessed One in verse:

1. "Many deities and men longing for happiness have pondered on (the question of) blessings. Pray tell me what the highest blessings are.
2. "Not to associate with the foolish, but to associate with the wise, and to honor those worthy of honor — this is the highest blessing.
3. "To reside in a suitable locality, to have performed meritorious actions in the past, and to set oneself in the right direction — this is the highest blessing.
4. "Vast learning, skill in handicrafts, well grounded in discipline, and pleasant speech — this is the highest blessing.
5. "To support one's father and mother; to cherish one's wife and children, and to be engaged in peaceful occupations — this is the highest blessing.
6. "Liberality, righteous conduct, rendering assistance to relatives, and performance of blameless deeds — this is the highest blessing.
7. "To cease and abstain from evil, to abstain from intoxicating drinks, and diligent in performing righteous acts — this is the highest blessing.
8. "Reverence, humility, contentment, gratitude, and

the timely hearing of the Dhamma, the teaching of the Buddha — this is the highest blessing.

9. "Patience, obedience, meeting the Samanas (holy men), and timely discussions on the Dhamma — this is the highest blessing.
10. "Self-control, chastity, comprehension of the Noble Truths, and the realization of Nibbana — this is the highest blessing.
11. "The mind that is not touched by the vicissitudes of life,[1] the mind that is free from sorrow, stainless, and secure — this is the highest blessing.
12. "Those who have fulfilled the conditions (for such blessings) are victorious everywhere, and attain happiness everywhere — To them these are the highest blessings."

The Lessons of Gratitude Head & Heart Together Essays on the Buddhist Path by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

"These two people are hard to find in the world. Which two? The one who is first to do a kindness, and the one who is grateful and thankful for a kindness done."
—AN 2:118

In saying that kind and grateful people are rare, the Buddha isn't simply stating a harsh truth about the human race. He's advising you to treasure these people when you find them, and more importantly showing how you can become a rare person yourself. Kindness and gratitude are virtues you can cultivate, but they have to be cultivated together. Each needs the other to be genuine a point that becomes obvious when you think about the three things most likely to make gratitude heartfelt:

1) You've actually benefitted from another person's actions.
2) You trust the motives behind those actions.
3) You sense that the other person had to go out of his or her way to provide that benefit.

Points one and two are lessons that gratitude teaches kindness: If you want to be genuinely kind, you have to be of actual benefit nobody wants to be the recipient of "help" that isn't really helpful and you have to provide that benefit in a way that shows respect and empathy for the other person's needs. No one likes to receive a gift given with calculating motives, or in an offhand or disdainful way. Points two and three are lessons that kindness teaches to gratitude. Only if you've been kind to another person will you accept the idea that others can be kind to you. At the same time, if you've been kind to another person, you know the effort involved. Kind impulses often have to do battle with unkind impulses in the heart, so it's not always easy to be helpful. Sometimes it involves great sacrifice a sacrifice possible only when you trust the recipient to make good use of your help. So when you're on the receiving end of a sacrifice like that, you realize you've incurred a debt, an obligation to repay the other person's trust. This is why the Buddha always discusses gratitude as a response to kindness, and doesn't equate it with appreciation in general. It's a special kind of appreciation, inspiring a more demanding response. The difference here is best illustrated by two passages in which the Buddha uses the image of carrying. The first passage concerns appreciation of a general sort: "Then the man, having gathered grass, twigs, branches, & leaves, having bound them together to make a raft, would cross over to safety on the far shore in dependence on the raft, making an effort with his hands & feet. Having crossed over to the far shore, he might think, 'How useful this raft has been to me! For it was in dependence on this raft that, making an effort with my hands & feet, I have crossed over to safety on the far shore. Why don't I, having hoisted it on my head or carrying on my back, go wherever I like?' What do you think, monks? Would the man, in doing that, be doing what should be done with the raft?" "No, lord."

"And what should the man do in order to be doing what should be done with the raft? There

is the case where the man, having crossed over to the far shore, would think, 'How useful this raft has been to me! For it was in dependence on this raft that, making an effort with my hands & feet, I have crossed over to safety on the far shore. Why don't I, having dragged it on dry land or sinking it in the water, go wherever I like?' In doing this, he would be doing what should be done with the raft."

- MN 22

The second passage concerns gratitude in particular: "I tell you, monks, there are two people who are not easy to repay. Which two? Your mother & father. Even if you were to carry your mother on one shoulder & your father on the other shoulder for 100 years, and were to look after them by anointing, massaging, bathing, & rubbing their limbs, and they were to defecate & urinate right there [on your shoulders], you would not in that way pay or repay your parents. If you were to establish your mother & father in absolute sovereignty over this great earth, abounding in the seven treasures, you would not in that way pay or repay your parents. Why is that? Mother & father do much for their children. They care for them, they nourish them, they introduce them to this world. "But anyone who rouses his unbelieving mother & father, settles & establishes them in conviction; rouses his unvirtuous mother & father, settles & establishes them in virtue; rouses his stingy mother & father, settles & establishes them in generosity; rouses his foolish mother & father, settles & establishes them in discernment: To this extent one pays & repays one's mother & father."

- AN 2:32

In other words, as the first passage shows, it's perfectly fine to appreciate the benefits you've received from rafts and other conveniences without feeling any need to repay them. You take care of them simply because that enables you to benefit from them more. The same holds true for difficult people and situations that have forced you to develop strength of character. You can appreciate that you've learned persistence from dealing with crabgrass in your lawn, or equanimity from dealing with unreasonable neighbors, without owing the crabgrass or neighbors any debt of gratitude. After all, they didn't kindly go out of their way to help you. And if you were to take them as models, you'd learn all the wrong lessons about kindness: that simply following your natural impulses or, even worse, behaving unreasonably is the way to be kind. Debts of gratitude apply only to parents, teachers, and

other benefactors who have acted with your well-being in mind. They've gone out of their way to help you, and have taught you valuable lessons about kindness and empathy in the process. In the case of the raft, you'd do best to focus gratitude on the person who taught you how to make a raft. In the case of the crabgrass and the neighbors, focus gratitude on the people who taught you how not to be overcome by adversity.

(To read the full article: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/headandheartbook.pdf>)

PALI CANON

Anguttara-nikaya 2.32

Even if one should carry about one's mother on one shoulder and one's father on the other, and so doing should live a hundred years . . . moreover, if one should set them up as supreme rulers, having absolute rule over the wide earth abounding in the seven treasures—not even by this could one repay one's parents. And why! Bhikkhus, parents do a lot for their children: they bring them up, provide them with food, introduce them to the world.

Yet, bhikkhus, whoever encourages their faithless parents, and settles and establishes them in faith; or whoever encourages their immoral parents and settles and establishes them in morality, or whoever encourages their stingy parents, and settles and establishes them in generosity, or whoever encourages their foolish parents, and settles and establishes them in wisdom—such a person, in this way repays, more than repays, what is due to their parents.

The Gift of Gratitude

Ajahn Sumedho recounts the joyful unfolding of a deep appreciation for his teacher and parents.

My father died about six years ago. He was then ninety years old, and he had never shown love or positive feelings toward me. So from early childhood I had this feeling that he did not like me. I carried this feeling through most of my life. I never had any kind of love, any kind of warm relationship with my father. It was always a perfunctory "Hello son, good to see you." And he seemed to feel threatened by me. I remember whenever I came home as a Buddhist monk he would

say, "Remember, this is my house, you've got to do as I say." This was his greeting—and I was almost fifty years old at the time! I don't know what he thought I was going to do.

My father was an aspiring artist before the Depression. Then in '29 the crash came and he and my mother lost everything, so he had to take a job selling shoes to support us. Then the Second World War started, but my father was too old to enlist in the military. He wanted to support the war effort, so he became a ship fitter in Seattle. He didn't like that job, but it was the best way he could help in the war. After the war he went back to his shoe business and became a manager of a retail store. He never really liked that work either, but he felt he was too old to find another profession. He had sacrificed his own preferences to support my mother, my sister, and me.

When I was at university in the 1950s, it was fashionable to study psychology. At that time the trend was to blame your mother for everything that went wrong in your life. The focus was on mothers and what they had done to cause us to suffer now. I didn't realize then that suffering was natural. Of course my mother was not perfect, so naturally there were things she could have done better. But generally speaking, the dedication, commitment, love, and care were all there—and directed mainly to making the lives of my father, my sister, and me as good and as happy as could be. She asked very little for herself, and when I think back like this, *katannu*, Pali for gratitude, arises in my mind for my mother and father.

The Buddha encouraged us to think of the good things done for us by our parents, by our teachers, friends, whomever; and to do this intentionally, to cultivate it, rather than just letting it happen accidentally.

My students who have a lot of anger toward their parents ask me how they can develop gratitude toward them. Teaching lovingkindness, or *metta*, on too sentimental a basis can actually increase anger. I remember a woman on one of our retreats who, whenever it came to spreading *metta* to her parents, would go into a rage. Then she felt very guilty about it. Every time she thought about her mother, she felt only rage. This was because she used only her intellect; she wanted to do this practice of *metta*, but emotionally felt anything but lovingkindness.

It's important to see this conflict between the intel-

lectual and the emotional life. We know in our mind that we should be able to forgive our enemies and love our parents, but in the heart we feel “I can never forgive them for what they’ve done.” So then we either feel anger and resentment, or we begin to rationalize: “Because my parents were so bad, so unloving, so unkind, they made me suffer so much that I can’t forgive or forget.” Or: “There’s something wrong with me. I’m a terrible person because I can’t forgive.” When this happens, I’ve found it helpful to have metta for my own feelings. If we feel that our parents were unkind and unloving, we can have metta toward the feeling we have in our hearts; without judgment, we can see that this is how it feels, and to accept that feeling with patience.

Once I began to accept my negativity about my father rather than suppress it, I could resolve it. When we resolve something with mindfulness, we can let it go and free ourselves from its power. The resolution of such a conflict leads us to contemplate what life is about.

Messenger by Mary Oliver

My work is loving the world.
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird—

equal seekers of sweetness.
Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.

Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?

Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect?
Let me keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,

which is mostly standing still and learning to be
astonished.

The phoebe, the delphinium.

The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.

Which is mostly rejoicing, since all the ingredi-
ents are here, which is gratitude,

to be given a mind and a heart and these body-
clothes, a mouth with which to give shouts of joy

to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up
clam, telling them all, over and over, how it is
that we live forever.

