

More Than Thanks

By Bhikshuni Thubten Saldon

Bowing to the Buddha is my expression of gratitude for the richness of teaching. According to western psychology, gratitude is described as an emotion expressing appreciation for one has—as opposed to, say, a consumer-oriented emphasis on what one desires or needs.

In Buddhist dharma, emotions are not seen as separated from ideas, concepts, and a whole array of interconnected phenomena. The Buddha said that gratitude is a mark of a good person: 'Truly, good people are thankful and grateful.' (Vin.I,61). But he also recognized that gratitude is not common: 'These two types of people are hard to find in the world. What two? One who will do a favor first and one who is grateful for a favor done.' (A.I,86).

Looking at definitions of the word, I have found in the Pali canon two words for gratitude: *kataveditā* and *kataññutā*.

Kataññutā, literally means 'knowing what has been done'. The meaning that this description has for me is that what seems to come first is the knowing aspect of the mind, the one that acknowledges an action, a situation or even a phenomenon. This knowing aspect requires mindfulness, requires we be present to what actually is happening in and around us at any given moment, by contrast of being lost mentally in our tantalizing story lines.

Kataveditā, denotes the aspect of the wish to articulate our appreciation and/or to repay it.

Both aspects, the knowing aspect and the conveying aspect, seem equally important to me. It is not enough to know for oneself alone that one is grateful to somebody; to be able to communicate it is a wonderful skill and a great source of benefit and joy for oneself and other. Just a couple of days ago I witnessed an exchange – in this temple – between a monk and a devotee. One expressing and the

other receiving gratitude, and this exchange enlightened me on how important it is, this second aspect, the one of expressing and communicating our gratitude. As the teacher of my teacher used to say, "Bodhicitta is all about communication".

As most of us are still walking the path, the acknowledgment for whatever positive actions we perform is always an encouragement to do more of the same. Once we perform an action of kindness or support, we then have the opportunity to rejoice on our own virtue and on the happiness of the receiving person.

The Dharma – especially in the West – can sometimes be practiced in such a way that our focus is on our negativities and how to deal with them. To avoid this lopsidedness, the Buddha also taught us to contemplate and then celebrate our strengths and our virtues (*sīlānusati*), the aspects about ourselves we sometimes ignore. 'Rejoicing here, rejoicing there, rejoicing both here and there, one rejoices and is appreciative reflecting on one's own good deeds.' (Dhp.16). In this way, gratitude in our relationship with others is beneficial for the one who gives, beneficial for the one who receives, the one who acknowledges, the one who rejoices. It is a win/win situation. *Emaho!* (How wonderful!).

There are many, many other aspects to gratitude that could be mentioned. The gratitude for whatever circumstances arise in our lives, regardless of us rushing to paste onto that situation the label of good or bad, for instance. To be able to hold an uncomplicated gratitude for the fascinating inscrutability that life presents to us, for the mystery and openness of not knowing, is an open window to what we call *Sunyata*. Could we just be grateful, remain receptive and let go

of our attachment to wanting things to be a certain way, then we will realize that anything totally unexpected can happen anytime, that any given situation can go either way, or better said, it can go a myriad of ways. Indeed, due to the vertiginous pace at what a situation (and a person) can change, we can go nuts scrambling to get some security by trying to fix the unfixable, continually changing, impermanent, dynamic process that any situation is by attaching the safe labels of "good" and "bad".

There is no other dharma story tale that illustrates this with more straightforwardness and humor than the following old story. It is told in many traditions; I have heard it from Tibetans but I know that also Sufis mention it; its origin doesn't really matter – it is just good old wisdom.

A man's grandson captured a strong, gorgeous, wild horse, and all the neighbors told the man how fortunate he was. The man patiently replied, "We will see." One day the horse threw the son, who broke his leg, and all the neighbors told the man how cursed he was that the son had ever found the horse. Again, the man answered, "We will see." Soon after the son broke his leg, the horse ran away, and all the neighbors came to tell the man how cursed he was. The man patiently replied, "We will see". The following day the horse came back bringing his entire herd straight into the old man's stables, and all the neighbors told the man how fortunate he was. The man patiently replied, "We will see." Sometime later soldiers came to the village and pressed into service all the able-bodied young men but the son, being disabled, was spared. When the man's friends told him how lucky the broken leg was, the man would only say, "We will see." Gratitude for participating in the open mystery of life is like this.

Finally, we should look at another very powerful aspect to gratitude and how it helps us to realize interdependence. The Buddhist concept of dependent origination explains that everything in this world arises from and is supported by its environment. Everything and everyone is connected. There is no one, therefore, who does not owe a debt of gratitude to others. In this sense, gratitude may be described as our awareness that our lives are supported by our environment, which includes other people, and our desire to respond in kind to such support.

Practicing being present with gratitude time and again leads us to a direct experience of being connected to life and to the realization that there is a bigger context in which our personal drama is unfolding. Being relieved of the infinite wants and worries of our life's play, even if it is for a single moment, is liberating.

Why did I choose to write about gratitude of all the possible themes that we have in the dharma? Because it is a pending subject for me, and because I am in this most conducive and supporting environment – Pine Mountain Temple – I've found myself doing not what I anticipated doing, but doing what I needed to do: developing big time gratitude. To you, Rev. Phoebe and Rev. Seikai, with thankfulness and full appreciation for the vastness and extent of your mission here.

And as any modern writer should include at least one "link", so here is my contribution: "...and I'm so blessed." I hope you will watch and enjoy it.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRbL46mWx9w&feature=colike>

A – Anguttara NikāyaVin. – VinayaDhp. – DhammapadaEmaho – Tibetan-Sanskrit exclamation meaning something close to a marvelous realization.