

## *A Sense of Entitlement*

*April 12, 2004*

Some of the chants we recite in the evening are meant to inspire us, and others are meant to warn us, to keep us grounded, to make sure we don't get lost in abstractions, in ideas that are not all that relevant to where we are.

Like the chant on the requisites. It's there to remind us—day in, day out—that when you're born, you're born with a big lack. You've got this body that needs food, needs clothing, needs shelter, needs medicine, and you're not born with an entitlement to those things. If you were really entitled to them, they would come on their own. The fact that they *seem* to come on their own when we're children is because our parents are looking after us, but that means *they* have to go out and do extra work just to provide for this big, gaping hole they've just given birth to. And so as you grow up as a human being, you not only carry this huge load of needs around with you, but you also carry a big debt to the goodness, the work of other people. It's important to keep that in mind.

Part of the reason for that chant is to give a sense of *samvega*. You think about all the suffering that goes into making sure that we have the food we need to keep this body going, the clothing, the shelter, the medicine—not only from the work we ourselves have done to get these things, but also all the work and sacrifices that other beings make so that we can have them.

So we come to the practice with a huge debt. And the Buddha encourages us to have a sense of gratitude to everyone who's provided for us—materially and in terms of the Dhamma—because otherwise we get complacent.

There's a saying that gratitude is the sign of a good person. If you don't appreciate the goodness of other people, it's hard to make that extra effort needed to be a good person yourself. So stop and reflect every day on the debts you owe to other people and the various ways you might be able to repay those debts. This means that you should come to the practice not with a sense of entitlement but with a sense of how much you need the Dhamma practice to help compensate for the debts you've been accumulating over time.

Look at the monastery we have here. It's come about through the generosity of lots and lots of different people. They've been generous with their money, generous with their time, generous with their strength. Everything we have here is the result of somebody's generosity. One of the reasons we need to be really active in the practice, dedicated to the practice, not complacent in the practice, is

because we've got this debt. As the Buddha once said, the only people who are really debtless in this world are the arahants. As long as we haven't yet reached that point, we still have a debt to other people, to the other beings all around us. Whatever way we can build goodness through generosity of our own, observing the precepts, through the meditation, is a way of helping to repay that debt.

At the same time there's the question of keeping this teaching alive. You need to have a sense of how precious this is, this teaching of the Dhamma. It's not that beings get to meet with the Dhamma every lifetime. There are whole eons where the world has no notion of the Dhamma at all. We were born in a time when the Dhamma is still alive. There are still people practicing. The world is not empty of arahants. So value your opportunity. Think of your debt of gratitude to all the people who've kept this teaching alive, and do what you can to keep it alive for the people who come after you.

When you read Buddhist history, it can sometimes be a pretty depressing project, seeing how people take the Dhamma and bend it to other needs, other agendas, other ideas. And yet there are always people who have a sense of the Dhamma's true purpose and work to bring the tradition back in line. But think of all the difficulties they go through, like Ajaan Mun. In his days the forest tradition had degenerated. It was mainly composed of monks wandering around reciting magical spells, selling amulets to people. It was a kind of business. But he took the Vinaya and combined it with the forest practice and so rediscovered the way to Awakening.

At that time the Thai Buddhist hierarchy had decided that the way to nibbana was closed. Nobody seemed to be going that way—that was the official line. They even had made a survey of meditation temples to prove it. And Ajaan Mun had to prove single-handedly that it wasn't true, so you can imagine what he was up against—not only his own defilements, but the disapproval of state and ecclesiastical officials. When you read his biography, you learn just a little about the hardships he went through. So try to develop a sense of gratitude for what he did, so that you can maintain the Dhamma in your practice as well. Don't be guilty of the sort of changes in the Dhamma that someone else down the line is going to have to come along and straighten out.

Ideally we should come to the Dhamma not with a sense of entitlement, but with a sense of gratitude—a sense of how important it is and what's demanded of us to be equal to the Dhamma. When we have that attitude, our Dhamma practice really starts getting results. There's a lot demanded of us, but if we have a sense of conviction in the importance of the Dhamma, we'll be willing to make whatever effort's required.

Ajaan Fuang once told me that one of his prime motivations in practicing was that he was born into a poor family. He didn't do well in school, he was

orphaned at an early age, and as he was growing up he just didn't have anything to show for himself as a human being. If you want to make your way in Thai society, you've got to have a lot of good connections. Well, he had no connections, and he didn't have anything else to fall back on. He realized that this was his only hope for any kind of happiness: to build up the goodness that Dhamma practice can provide. So he threw himself into it, and his single-mindedness was what enabled him to attain what he did.

As we come to the Dhamma we need a strong sense of its importance—and a strong sense of our need for the Dhamma. We come to it not because we're entitled but because we're in debt—to our parents, to all the other living beings who've contributed to the fact that we now have a body and are still alive. Lots of people talk about interconnectedness as a wonderful thing, but it carries a lot of IOU's.

Try to think about this in a way that makes you willing and happy to repay those IOU's —understanding the need to repay them, and happy that you've found a way to meet that need. Use that as a motivation to keep your Dhamma practice in line, to keep yourself devoted to the practice. That way you benefit. You get the full set of benefits that can come from the practice, and the people around you get a fuller sense of its benefits as well.