

Gratitude & Trust

October 12, 2010

Tonight marks the twentieth anniversary of the founding of Wat Metta. It was on October 12, 1990, that the land was first purchased. And it's good to reflect on how much we owe to the people who first thought up the idea of having this monastery and to the people whose gift of land and whose development of the land into a monastery have provided us with an opportunity to practice.

Here there are two themes worthy of reflection. First is the Buddha's saying, *Vissasa parama ñati*: Our foremost relatives are those for whom we feel trust. It was Ajaan Suwat who first thought up the idea of having this monastery. The donor of the land, the people who gave money and time and energy to get the monastery off the ground: They weren't related to us at all and yet they had a sense of trust in future generations that this would be a good thing to do, a good gift to give, and there would be people who would take good advantage of it. As the Buddha said, that relation through trust is much closer than our blood relations. If you're like me, you have some blood relatives for whom you feel no trust at all. The sense of relatedness there is pretty weak. But the people for whom you feel trust: That's a relatedness that's very strong—the kind of relatedness that keeps the world going and gives us a sense that human society is a worthwhile thing.

Which relates to another topic: gratitude. There's a saying that there are two people who are hard to find in the world. First is the person who's an *upakari*: someone who helps you before receiving any help from you. Second is the person who's received that kind of help and feels gratitude in response. Both of these people should be cherished.

There's a lot of misunderstanding around the topic of gratitude. We tend to confuse it with appreciation and contentment. Appreciation is what you feel for things or incidents from which you benefit, but no one else's good intentions are involved. An example of appreciation would be the story the Buddha tells of the man who has to cross over a river and realizes he's going to need a raft, so he makes the raft and then swims across in dependence on the raft. When he gets to the other side, he says, "How helpful this raft has been to me!" That's a sense of appreciation: Without the raft, he wouldn't have gotten where he was. But the fact that he appreciates the raft doesn't mean that he has to carry it around with him from then on. He pulls it up on land or he sinks it down in the water near the shore and then goes on his way.

In other words, with appreciation you realize that you have benefited from something—and it can be a thing—and yet the need to respond is pretty minimal. In the case of something you can continue to use, you take care of it. And then there are cases of really negative events that helped to turn you around. Someone may have done something that was really nasty, but you grew into a stronger person because of it. You want to have an appreciation for the fact that sometimes you do benefit from misfortune, but that doesn't carry the lesson that you should heap misfortune on other people for the sake of what you can rationalize as their benefit. With gratitude, though, you've benefited from someone's good action, and that does carry the lesson that good actions are needed for human society to continue.

As for contentment, that simply means being happy with what you've got, realizing that you have good things and it's enough for the sake of the practice. The good things don't have to be all that good but they can be good enough so that you don't have to keep scrambling for more. That's contentment.

As for gratitude, that's more related to the teaching on kamma. When the Buddha introduced the topic of gratitude, he did so in the context of explaining kamma. After saying that there are good and bad actions that lead to good and bad results, he went on to say, "There is mother and father," which sounds like a non

sequitur and something perfectly obvious except for the fact that in those days there were people who said there is no such thing as mother or father, meaning that your parents just gave birth to you because they were compelled by forces larger than themselves. Whoever created the universe decreed that they were going to give birth to you, so it involved no goodness on their part. The fact that they looked after you was also decreed by some outside force so again, there was no goodness on their part. What this statement means—“There is no mother or father”—is that you don’t owe them anything.

So when the Buddha said, “There is mother and father,” he meant the opposite: that you do owe something to your parents. You owe a debt of gratitude because they were able to make the choice of whether they were going to care for you or not. It was their choice not to abort the pregnancy. It was their choice to teach you about the world: how to walk, how to talk, how to behave. And regardless of how foolish they may have been in other ways—and the Buddha admits that there are parents who are stingy and unvirtuous and pretty ignorant—even then you owe a huge debt of gratitude to them for what they’ve done, because they had to make some difficult choices. It’s not an easy thing to give birth to a child or to raise a child, and yet they made the difficult choice.

That’s what marks the whole issue of gratitude: People have the power to make choices. When the Buddha talks about gratitude, the language he uses focuses on words that derive from the root for action: *kar* in Pali. There’s *upakari*, the person who helped you to begin with and to whom you owe a debt of gratitude. It literally means someone who acted first. And your response to that person should be that you are going to act in return, *patikarosi*. And even the word gratitude itself, *kataññu*, means that you know what was done, you appreciate what was done.

So gratitude is not just a general appreciation. It’s specifically an appreciation for actions, realizing that you have a debt coming from other people’s kind actions, a debt that requires you to do something in return. You have to return the goodness. And again, even though your parents may have been abusive, still the Buddha says you try to repay them by teaching them or at least being a good example for them. He says if your parents are stingy, you try to induce them to become more generous; if your parents are not virtuous, you try to induce them to be more virtuous; if they have no faith in the principle of action, you try to develop that sense of faith and conviction in them; and if they’re not wise, you try to teach them the ways of wisdom. Of course, it’s difficult to teach your parents. They don’t like being taught by their children, but you can teach by example. That’s one way of repaying the debt.

But then there are cases where your parents are no longer around—or the people who helped you are no longer around, as in the case of Luang Pu Suwat, who was the first to think up the idea that we should have this monastery here. So how do you repay your debt to him? You think about his original intention and you try to maintain that intention: the goodness of his choice, the goodness of his ideas. You appreciate that goodness and then you try to act in a way that extends that goodness further through time. His intention was to have a place where people could practice: quiet, secluded, with trees we could sit under.

Think about the time of the Buddha, who was born under a tree, gained awakening under a tree, gave his first sermon under a tree, and passed away under a tree. To use Ajaan Suwat’s words, “The institution of Buddhism was established in the forest.” So he wanted there to be a place where you could really be out in the trees, out in the wilds, that offers both the seclusion that’s needed to practice and also some of the difficulties. We miss some of the conveniences of life in town here or at least we don’t have them, and it’s a good test. If things were very comfortable, very easy, and very convenient, you’d have no test against which to measure your greed, aversion, and delusion. But the hardships aren’t so overwhelming that we can’t practice: That’s the whole point. So that was his intention for starting this place. That’s the meaning of this place. To keep maintaining the meaning of the place, you want to keep practicing. We’re indebted to the people who’ve made this possible, and so the best way to repay that debt is to focus on the practice.

The Thai way of expressing this is that other people have started weaving something and so you continue the weaving. You don’t let the edges get all frayed. This is what gratitude is all about: It’s a sense not

only that you appreciate the choices that people made but also that you need to respond. The word *patikaroti* means to repay or to make amends, but it can also mean to imitate. In other words, you imitate the goodness that they did, the intention that they had. You try to carry that out. That's the response that keeps their goodness alive.

There's that question that people would often ask Ajaan Fuang: "How can I repay you for having taught me?" and his response was, "Be really intent on the practice." That's the best repayment right there.

So this is why the Buddha's teachings on gratitude are all surrounded by words that deal with action. You appreciate someone's good actions and then you realize there's an action that's called for from you, an appropriate response. That's what makes it different from appreciation or contentment. As the Buddha said, it's a characteristic of a good person to feel gratitude and to want to repay that debt in one way or another. This is why Ajaan Fuang would often say, if he saw someone who was ungrateful to his or her parents, that you don't want to have anything to do with that person, for that person doesn't value goodness. If that person doesn't value the goodness of his or her parents, you can't trust that person to be good to you. Gratitude means that you value goodness; you appreciate the difficulties that are involved in making the skillful choice and carrying it out. When you appreciate that and have gratitude for it, you're more likely to make the same kind of effort yourself.

So keep in mind the distinction between gratitude on the one hand and attitudes like appreciation or contentment on the other. Someone said recently that gratitude is wanting what you have. That's actually a description of contentment or appreciation. Gratitude is more focused. It's focused on actions: the actions you've benefited from and the actions you feel called on to make in response to repay your debt of gratitude and to try to continue this stream of goodness into the world, on into the future, so all of the benefits that have been entrusted to us will bear fruit. That's how we show that we're worthy of that trust.