

Karma & Gratitude

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When the Buddha talks about gratitude, he does so in the context of the teaching on karma and rebirth. And it's worth thinking about the implications of that fact. When he's talking about mundane right view – that there are good and bad actions and that these actions have results both in this lifetime and on into the next – he includes an interesting phrase, “There is mother and father.” Which seems almost too obvious to say: We all have mothers and fathers. But what it meant in the context of the time was that you owe a debt of gratitude to them. And it's because of the nature of karma that you do.

There were people who taught that whatever people do is totally determined by, say, the stars or some creator god or their past karma. In other words, people don't have choices. So when your parents had you, they had no choice in the matter. When they raised you, they had no choice in the matter. It was just what they had to do. And so there's no special debt of gratitude there, it's just the influences from the stars or the influences from whatever else acting through them.

But the Buddha's teaching on karma has several features that make gratitude an appropriate response to what our parents have done for us. One is that we have freedom of choice, our actions are real, and they come from our intentions and we have the choice of what kind of intentions we're going to act on. So when someone does something good for you, it was a choice, it does have a meaning. And if they had to go out of their way, if they had to make sacrifices, it's worth your gratitude.

In fact, the word for gratitude in Pali, *kataññu*, contains the word, *kata*, which comes from the verb “to do”; plus *aññū*: a person who knows. So *kataññū* means, that you literally know and appreciate what has been done. This is why gratitude is different from general appreciation. We can appreciate the trees for giving us shade. We can appreciate the cool weather right now, because it's making it easier to practice. But there's no one *doing* that. Or if you want to argue for a creator god doing that, you can say, “Well, why is it more difficult for an all-powerful god to do things pleasantly than unpleasantly?” But in the Buddha's teachings, those are just the way things are in terms of the way weather works or the way plants work. They have no decision in the matter. It's when people or other beings make the decision to go out of their way to do something good: *That* requires a special response on your part, both for the person who was good to you – you want to repay that goodness – and also for your own realization that other people may benefit from your going out of your way for them. In other words, you might want to spread the goodness around.

This kind of reflection opens your heart, widens your heart, makes you more likely to want to go out of your way. There's a saying – I'm not sure whether it's Thai or it's in the Pali Canon

– that, “Gratitude is the sign of a good person.” And it’s for this reason. If someone appreciates the goodness that other people have done and the extent to which they had to go out of their way, to deal with all kinds of difficulties, that makes it more likely that they themselves will be willing to go out of their way to be helpful, to be good.

There was a case years back in Thailand where a family living down in front of the monastery had a big ruckus one night. The son from the father’s previous marriage came back. He was an adult now, he got into a huge argument with the father, kicked him downstairs, and broke both of his legs. When the news came to the monastery, Ajaan Fuang’s first comment was, “You can never trust that son.” In other words, if he’s willing to do this to his father, he could do it to anybody.

So gratitude is a sign of a good person, and it’s an attitude that gives rise to more goodness within us. In particular, the Buddha talks about the debt we have to our parents. After all, we’re alive, we have a body, because of them. Even if they weren’t the best parents, at least we have this human lifetime, this particular body right now. So they in particular deserve a feeling of gratitude.

Now, the Buddha said the best way to repay that debt is that, if they are stingy, you try to teach them how to be generous. If they’re not virtuous, you try to teach them to be virtuous. In other words, whatever goodness they are lacking, you try to influence them in that direction. You know, of course, how hard it is to teach your parents, so you have to be really subtle and really wise in how you go about that. But it is possible. I’ve seen cases.

Or you reflect further on the Buddha’s teaching on parents. There’s his statement that it’d be very hard to meet someone who hasn’t been your mother or father in the past. Some people take that and say, “Oh, that means that you should feel affection for everybody because they’ve been your parents at some point or another.” But the Buddha takes it in a different direction. He says you give rise to sense of dismay. All these times you’ve been parents and all the times you’ve had all of these parents and all of the times you’ve been a parent to somebody else – it goes back and forth, back and forth, back and forth like this – and we know what it’s like between children and parents. From that sense of dismay comes a desire to get out of all this.

This connects to the teaching on the four types of karma. There’s basically bright karma and then there’s dark karma. Bright karma, of course, is good karma done with good intentions. Dark karma done with bad intentions. Then there’s mixed bright and dark. And then there’s the karma that leads away from karma, leads to an end of karma. And you look at the karma we have with everybody around us, we’ve had for who-knows-how-long, and it’s going to be a real mixture of bright and dark, in which your parents weren’t totally satisfactory and you’ve been a parent sometimes and, of course, what you did was not totally satisfactory to your children. Karma goes back and forth between bright and dark, bright and dark, and never gets anywhere unless you decide to get out.

So it's another good reflection to remember that one of the best things you can do for the whole mass of people – all these people who've been your parents and all the people you've been parents of in the past – is to get out of the system. And that's what we're doing as we meditate.

This is why the reflection on gratitude is a useful way of getting the mind to be willing to settle down here in the present moment, realizing that this is the way out. As the Buddha said, the karma of meditation leads to the end of karma and all the entanglements that come with karma. That's what the noble eightfold path is—everything from right view on through right concentration: It's the karma that leads to the end of karma.

So as we're working on concentration—in other words, basically right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration all together—at least that's what we're trying to develop: The karma that's going to get us out of this tangle and provide the best possible way of repaying the people that we've been so intimately connected with before. We can dedicate the goodness to them, and if they appreciate it, they will benefit. So you take your mind around the world, you take your mind around the huge span of time, and then you zero in on the present moment, because the present moment is the way out.

This is the same pattern that the Buddha followed on the night of his awakening. The first knowledge was about time: how far it goes back, and all the narratives of his lives. You think *you* have narratives when you come to sit down here. The Buddha had thousands and thousands of them. But having so many reduced each one to the bare essentials: This is what he looked like; this is what his name was or what he was called; this was his experience of pleasure and pain; this was what he ate; and this was how he died. That's life: five sentences. And one after another, after another.

But instead of getting tied up in the narratives, the next question was, "Well, does everybody else follow this pattern too?" And the second knowledge of the night was an awareness spread to fill the entire universe. He realized that everybody goes through this process. And then seeing the fact that everybody went through the process, he also saw what drove it. Basically it was intentions, and intentions were skillful or unskillful depending on whether they were based on right view or wrong view.

So the third question was, "What kind of intentions and views might lead out?" That's when he gained the knowledge that led to his awakening. That's how he got out.

So sometimes, as you sit down to meditate, it's good to think about past expanses of time, past expanses of the universe, to see the common patterns. And then realize that the common patterns are generated here in your mind, here in the present moment, which is why we're working on your mind right here. To try to get some control over your intentions is a gift to yourself and to the people around you. This is one of the good things about the Buddha's teaching on merit: It's basically instructions on how to find happiness in your engagement with the world in a way that doesn't cause any suffering, doesn't cause any harm to anyone. In other

words, your happiness spreads around, and in so doing, it becomes goodness. And meditation is one of those activities where the happiness, the goodness, spreads around.

You see this most clearly if you've been meditating and the mind was filled with anger before you sat down to meditate but by the time you're done, the anger has subsided. That means you've saved the people around you from the anger that you might have expressed in your words or deeds. The more time you give to the meditation, the more you train the mind, then the deeper the results become, and the deeper the impact they have on other people.

So all these contemplations come under what the Buddha calls *generating desire*, which is part of right effort: generating the desire to do something skillful, to understand action and your power of choice, and making up your mind that you'll try to use that power well. You're not like the congressman in that *New Yorker* cartoon, where two congressmen are coming down the steps of the Capitol and one of them's saying, "What's the use of having power if you can't abuse it?" You've got a power here, and if you abuse it you're going to be the one who's abused. So you want to use this power of choice and you want to use it well. And you can. The Buddha's showing you how. The instructions are not superhuman. As he said, if they were superhuman, he wouldn't have taught them.

So when the mind feels tempted to go out someplace else, remind yourself: What you're doing right here, being with the breath, even though you may not be seeing all the results you want right away, at least it's headed in the right direction. We don't just sit in the present moment. The present moment has an arrow. Time has an arrow. It moves into the future. What you choose to do now will have an impact now and on into the future. Sometimes the immediate impact is not what you want, or not as good as you want, but it's headed in the right direction. It's part of a path, a path that leads to knowledge, a path that leads to awakening, a path that leads to goodness all around. So when you're tempted to slip off the path, remind yourself, it's hard to find a path that good. And whatever else you're slipping off to is pretty miserable in comparison.

It's in this way that reflection on gratitude in the context of karma can bring you right here, doing what you should be doing in terms of the duties of the four noble truths.: duties that are not imposed on you, but when you realize you want to put an end to suffering, you want to put an end to karma, this is how it's done and here's your opportunity to do it. So let that thought be uplifting.