

*“Gratitude to Parents” — May 8, 2013*

Focus on your breath. Settle in from the activity of the morning, and remind yourself you're doing this not only for yourself but also for the people around you.

There's a passage where the Buddha says that all good teachings are alike in that they teach gratitude to parents. It's good to think about that when the mind settles down.

I used to ask Thai people what they would identify as the most basic Buddhist virtue, and they'd always say gratitude. But as the Buddha himself pointed out, it's not just a Buddhist value. It's universal, it's everywhere. Particularly the virtue of gratitude for your parents.

Back when you were small and weak, they were strong. They looked after you. The time's going to come when you're strong and they're weak. So, you owe it to them to help them, because after all they had the choice when you were defenseless: They didn't have to raise you. They didn't even have to give birth to you. They could have aborted you. But they chose to give birth to you, they chose to raise you, they went through all kinds of difficulties. And so regardless of whether you feel that they were skillful parents or not, at least you're indebted to them for that much: that they enabled you to survive.

If they did teach you right and wrong, and did teach you good things about what it means to be a good person, you owe them that much more.

So how do you repay them? Part of it is by actually becoming a good person yourself.

There's an old Thai verse, it's in Pali but I can't find it in the Canon anywhere. A Thai monk apparently wrote a verse in Pali, saying that the sign of a good person is gratitude. The fact that you're grateful for the goodness done for you shows that you recognize goodness when you see it. That's a sign that you'll be more likely to appreciate the effort that goes into goodness, and to go through the effort of doing good things yourself. So this is one of the ways in which you show your gratitude: by training your mind so that you're a good, reliable person—reliable to yourself, reliable to the people around you.

Then, when the time comes to repay any karmic debts you have to the people who've helped you, you're in a position where you can. You've strengthened your mind through the practice. As the Buddha said, the best way to repay your parents, if they're are not generous, is to give them the example of being generous so that they might become inspired to be generous, too. If they're not virtuous, give them the example of being virtuous so they might be inspired to become virtuous. That's how to repay your debt to your parents.

In cases where it's difficult to deal with your parents, use the strength of mind that comes from concentration and from developing your discernment to support you in behaving skillfully around them. That makes your dealings with them a lot easier, and puts you in a position where you can trust yourself not to harm them or yourself.

So work on these qualities. They're good for you; they're good for the people around you.

A lot of the good things in the world—like status, wealth, praise, and material pleasures—are the sorts of things that, when you gain, other people have to lose. Or if they gain, you might have to lose. There's always somebody gaining, somebody losing. Those “goods” create a lot of divisions in the world. That's

why we see so much divisiveness in our society right now. It's because everybody seems to be focused on the types of goods and the types of happiness that create divisiveness. So those things aren't really good. The happiness they give is not really happy.

So look instead for the kinds of happiness where the boundaries get erased. When you're generous, that erases boundaries. When you're virtuous and are careful about other people's well-being, that erases boundaries. When you develop qualities of goodwill in your heart, that erases boundaries. Those are the kinds of goods that you really want to work on because everybody benefits—which means that the goodness of those goods is genuinely good.

So keep these thoughts in mind.