

Showing Gratitude

May 14, 2017

Close your eyes and watch your breath. Watch it all the way in, all the way out. Try to be consistent. Stay with the breath as long as you can. If the mind slips off, just bring it right back.

This goodness that we're creating in our mind has to come from a good foundation, and the foundation requires that your mind be mindful and alert. Without these qualities, you're lost. If you can remember things you've learned, then they help you; if you don't remember them, then the learning doesn't really serve any purpose at all. That's what mindfulness is for.

Then there's alertness, which is to watch what you're actually doing, to make sure that the good things you've learned in the past are applied in the present moment, that you don't forget.

We depend a lot on the past. We tend to forget that. There's so much emphasis on being in the present, being in the present—but who taught us that? There must have been people who taught us that, otherwise we would have no idea that being with the breath would accomplish anything. So we have to remember that we're indebted to a lot of people.

Today's Mothers' Day. We think about how we're indebted to our mothers. It's also the anniversary of the day that Ajaan Fuang, my teacher, passed away. We have to think how we're all indebted to our teachers. One way to show our appreciation for that debt is to put into practice the good things they taught. If there's some way we can help them, we're happy to help them. If they've passed on, then we take that goodness and make sure it doesn't die from the world. They went to all that effort to teach us, to raise us, but then if we just throw it away then it's to no purpose at all.

But if we remember that these are the good things that people have passed down, this is what makes human beings different from animals. We have a culture that we can pass down from one generation to the next about the things that really are of value, things that really do make a difference, things that lead to a genuine happiness inside. So we want to appreciate that fact and make sure that we put these teachings to use.

After all, as the Buddha said, the Dhamma that he found is in the world all the time, but the knowledge of the Dhamma is something that comes and goes. A Buddha finds it, it stays with us for while, and then people start forgetting it. They start wandering away, interested in other things, and that good knowledge just gets forgotten. Then it takes a long time before another Buddha can come and find it again.

At the moment, that knowledge is here with us. It's been passed down by our parents; it's been passed down by our teachers. So let's make sure that at least it doesn't die with us, that we keep it alive in the world. This is our way of showing our gratitude for the help that they've given us.

As the Buddha said, gratitude is a sign of a good person. That's because a good person appreciates the fact that the help that he or she received—from teachers and parents and other people—didn't come free. In other words, those people had to make an effort. It wasn't that they were forced to do this.

One of Ajaan Fuang's favorite statements was that nobody hired us to be born, and no one is hiring us to practice. They're not forcing us, but it's good knowledge to pass on. Those who came before us saw the goodness of the knowledge they'd gained in the past and they've passed it on to us. We want to make sure that it stays alive with us—that we benefit from it, and that the people who see our good example will benefit from it as well.

This way, the Dhamma's not just words; the good things we learned from our parents are not just words. They're actually embodied in our actions. This is what keeps them alive. This is how we show our gratitude, our appreciation for the fact that the good things that people have done took a lot of effort on their part. So we're willing to put out the effort ourselves. If someone doesn't have gratitude, it shows they don't appreciate the effort that other people have put into the help they've received, so why are they going to create any effort? They just do what they want.

When you're looking around and can see people who don't show a sense of gratitude to their parents, don't show a sense of gratitude to their teachers, stay away from those people. You can't trust them. It's the people who are really grateful: Those are the people who understand goodness and understand the effort that's needed to keep goodness alive. Those are the people who are more likely to be people you can trust.

If you embody those qualities in yourself, then you find that you can trust yourself as well. After all, we do have to depend on ourselves. The things that our parents, the things that our teachers taught us: They on their own are not going to make us good. We have to make the effort. If we don't make the effort, then we're at the mercy of our moods: Whatever comes whispering into our ears, or whispering into our head, we just go with it. But if we realize that goodness requires some restraint, it requires some effort, and we're willing to put that effort into our lives, that's a sign of gratitude. It's also a sign of wisdom. The two qualities go together.