

The Lessons of Gratitude

“These two people are hard to find in the world. Which two? The one who is first to do a kindness, and the one who is grateful and thankful for a kindness done.” — AN 2:118

In saying that kind and grateful people are rare, the Buddha isn't simply stating a harsh truth about the human race. He's advising you to treasure these people when you find them, and—more importantly—showing how you can become a rare person yourself.

Kindness and gratitude are virtues you can cultivate, but they have to be cultivated together. Each needs the other to be genuine—a point that becomes obvious when you think about the three things most likely to make gratitude heartfelt:

- 1) You've actually benefitted from another person's actions.
- 2) You trust the motives behind those actions.
- 3) You sense that the other person had to go out of his or her way to provide that benefit.

Points one and two are lessons that gratitude teaches kindness: If you want to be genuinely kind, you have to be of actual benefit—nobody wants to be the recipient of “help” that isn't really helpful—and you have to provide that benefit in a way that shows respect and empathy for the other person's needs. No one likes to receive a gift given with calculating motives, or in an offhand or disdainful way.

Points two and three are lessons that kindness teaches to gratitude. Only if you've been kind to another person will you accept the idea that others can be kind to you. At the same time, if you've been kind to another person, you know the effort involved. Kind impulses often have to do battle with unkind impulses in the heart, so it's not always easy to be helpful. Sometimes it involves great sacrifice—a sacrifice possible only when you trust the recipient to make good use of your help. So when you're on the receiving end of a sacrifice like that, you realize you've incurred a debt, an obligation to repay the other person's trust.

This is why the Buddha always discusses gratitude as a response to kindness, and doesn't equate it with appreciation in general. It's a special kind of appreciation, inspiring a more demanding response. The difference here is best illustrated by two passages in which the Buddha uses the image of carrying.

The first passage concerns appreciation of a general sort:

“Then the man, having gathered grass, twigs, branches, & leaves, having bound them together to make a raft, would cross over to safety on the far shore in dependence on the raft, making an effort with his hands & feet. Having crossed over to the far shore, he might think, ‘How useful this raft has been to me! For it was in dependence on this raft that, making an effort with my hands & feet, I have crossed over to safety on the far shore. Why don't I, having hoisted it on my head

or carrying on my back, go wherever I like?’ What do you think, monks? Would the man, in doing that, be doing what should be done with the raft?”

“No, lord.”

“And what should the man do in order to be doing what should be done with the raft? There is the case where the man, having crossed over to the far shore, would think, ‘How useful this raft has been to me! For it was in dependence on this raft that, making an effort with my hands & feet, I have crossed over to safety on the far shore. Why don’t I, having dragged it on dry land or sinking it in the water, go wherever I like?’ In doing this, he would be doing what should be done with the raft.” — MN 22

The second passage concerns gratitude in particular:

“I tell you, monks, there are two people who are not easy to repay. Which two? Your mother & father. Even if you were to carry your mother on one shoulder & your father on the other shoulder for 100 years, and were to look after them by anointing, massaging, bathing, & rubbing their limbs, and they were to defecate & urinate right there [on your shoulders], you would not in that way pay or repay your parents. If you were to establish your mother & father in absolute sovereignty over this great earth, abounding in the seven treasures, you would not in that way pay or repay your parents. Why is that? Mother & father do much for their children. They care for them, they nourish them, they introduce them to this world.

“But anyone who rouses his unbelieving mother & father, settles & establishes them in conviction; rouses his unvirtuous mother & father, settles & establishes them in virtue; rouses his stingy mother & father, settles & establishes them in generosity; rouses his foolish mother & father, settles & establishes them in discernment: To this extent one pays & repays one’s mother & father.” — AN 2:32

In other words, as the first passage shows, it’s perfectly fine to appreciate the benefits you’ve received from rafts and other conveniences without feeling any need to repay them. You take care of them simply because that enables you to benefit from them more. The same holds true for difficult people and situations that have forced you to develop strength of character. You can appreciate that you’ve learned persistence from dealing with crabgrass in your lawn, or equanimity from dealing with unreasonable neighbors, without owing the crabgrass or neighbors any debt of gratitude. After all, they didn’t kindly go out of their way to help you. And if you were to take them as models, you’d learn all the wrong lessons about kindness: that simply following your natural impulses—or, even worse, behaving unreasonably—is the way to be kind. Debts of gratitude apply only to parents, teachers, and other benefactors who have acted with your wellbeing in mind. They’ve gone out of their way to help you, and have taught you valuable lessons about kindness and empathy in the process. In the case of the raft, you’d do best to focus gratitude on the person who taught you how to make a raft. In the case of the crabgrass and the neighbors, focus gratitude on the people who taught you how not to be overcome by adversity. If there are benefits you’ve received from things or situations you can’t trace to a conscious agent in this lifetime, feel gratitude to yourself for the good karma you did in the past that allowed those benefits to

appear. And be grateful for the good karma that allows you to receive and benefit from other people's help in the first place. If you had no good to your credit, they wouldn't be able to reach you.

As the Buddha's second passage shows, the debt you owe to your benefactors needn't be tit for tat, and shouldn't be directed solely to them. Now, the debt you owe your parents for giving birth to you and enabling you to live is immense. In some passages the Buddha recommends expressing gratitude for their compassion with personal services.

*Mother & father,
compassionate to their family,
are called
 Brahma,
 first teachers,
 those worthy of gifts
 from their children.
So the wise should pay them
 homage,
 honor
 with food & drink
 clothing & bedding
 anointing & bathing
 & washing their feet.
Performing these services to their parents,
the wise
 are praised right here
 and after death
 rejoice in heaven. — Iti 106*

However, AN 2:32 shows that the only true way to repay your parents is to strengthen them in four qualities: conviction, virtue, generosity, and discernment. To do so, of course, you have to develop these qualities in yourself, as well as learning how to employ great tact in being an example to your parents. As it happens, these four qualities are also those of an admirable friend (AN 8:54), which means that in repaying your parents in this way you become the sort of person who'd be an admirable friend to others as well. You become a person of integrity, who—as the Buddha points out—has learned from gratitude how to be harmless in all your dealings and to give help with an empathetic heart: respectfully, in a timely way, and with the sense that something good will come of it (MN 110; AN 5:148). In this way, you repay your parents' goodness many times over by allowing its influence to spread beyond the small circle of the family into the world at large. In so doing, you enlarge the circle of their goodness as well.

This principle also applies to your teachers, as the Buddha told his disciples:

“So this is what you think of me: ‘The Blessed One, sympathetic, seeking our well-being, teaches the Dhamma out of sympathy.’ Then you should train yourselves—harmoniously, cordially, and without dispute—in the qualities I have pointed out, having known them directly: the four frames of reference, the

four right exertions, the four bases of power, the five faculties, the five strengths, the seven factors of Awakening, the noble eightfold path.” — MN 103

In other words, the way to repay a teacher’s compassion and sympathy in teaching you is to apply yourself to learning your lessons well. Only then can you spread the good influence of those lessons to others.

As for the debts you owe yourself for your past good karma, the best way to repay them is to use your benefits as opportunities to create further good karma, and not simply enjoy the pleasure they offer. Here again it’s important to remember the hardships that can be involved in acting skillfully, and to honor your past skillful intentions by not allowing them to go to waste in the present. For example, as Ajaan Lee once said, it’s not easy to attain a human mouth, so bow down to your mouth every day. In other words, respect your ability to communicate, and use it to say only what’s timely, beneficial, and true.

These are some of the lessons about kindness and empathy that well-focused gratitude can teach—lessons that teach you how to deal maturely and responsibly in the give and take of social life. Small wonder, then, that the Buddha cited gratitude as *the* quality defining what it means to be civilized (AN 2:31).

But well-focused gratitude can also teach lessons that apply further to the training of the mind.

First are the lessons touching on the nature of human action itself. The sense that you’ve benefited from another person’s action underscores the point that action does give results; the importance you give to the other person’s motives in helping you underscores the point that the quality of the action lies in the intention behind it; and the sense that the other person went out of his or her way to help you underscores the sense that action isn’t totally determined: You feel indebted to the people who helped you because you sense how easily they might have denied that help, and how difficult your life might have been if that’s what they had chosen to do. Your parents, for instance, didn’t *have* to raise you, or arrange for someone else to raise you; they could have aborted you or left you to die. So the fact that you’re alive to read this means that somebody chose, again and again, to help you when you were helpless. Sensing that element of choice is what creates your sense of debt.

All three of these points—the efficacy of action, the importance of intention, and the existence of choice—were distinctive elements in the Buddha’s teaching on action. And the emotional resonance that gratitude and empathy give to these points may be the reason why, when the Buddha introduced the basic outline of this teaching, he cited topics connected with these emotions: the value of giving, and the debt owed to one’s parents (MN 117). He couldn’t offer his listeners proof for his three points—that would come only with their experience of Awakening—but by showing how his teaching on action allowed for generosity to be a meaningful action, and gratitude a meaningful emotion, he offered his listeners an emotionally satisfying reason for accepting his words.

Gratitude also gives practice in developing qualities needed in meditation. As the Buddha noted, the practice of concentration centers on the power of perception. Training in gratitude shows how powerful perception can be, for it requires developing a particular set of perceptions about life and the world. If you perceive help as demeaning, then gratitude itself feels demeaning; but if you

perceive help as an expression of trust—the other person wouldn't want to help you unless he or she felt you would use the help well—then gratitude feels ennobling, an aid to self-esteem. Similarly, if you perceive life as a competition, it's hard to trust the motives of those who help you, and you resent the need to repay their help as a gratuitous burden. If, however, you perceive that the goodness in life is the result of cooperation, then the give and take of kindness and gratitude become a much more pleasant exchange.

Similarly, gratitude requires mindfulness, in the Buddha's original sense of the word as keeping something in mind. In fact, the connection between these two qualities extends to language itself. In Pali, the word for gratitude—*kataññu*—literally means to have a sense of what was done. In SN 48:10, the Buddha defines mindfulness as “remembering & able to call to mind even things that were done & said long ago.” Our parents' instructions to us when we were children—to remember the kindnesses of others—are among our first lessons in mindfulness. As we develop our sense of gratitude, we get practice in strengthening this quality of mind.

However, not all the lessons taught by gratitude and empathy are of a heartwarming sort. Instead, they give rise to a sense of *samvega*—which can be translated as dismay or even terror—over how risky and precarious the goodness of the world can be. To begin with, there's the fact that you can't choose beforehand whose kindness you'll be indebted to. There's no telling what kind of parents you'll get. As the Buddha rightly notes, some parents are stingy, immoral, and foolish. Not only are they abusive to their children, but they also might not be content or even pleased with the type of repayment the Buddha says is best for them. They may demand an unreasonable level of repayment, involving actions that are downright harmful for you, themselves, and others. And yet this doesn't cancel the debt you owe them for the simple fact that they've enabled you to live.

You've probably heard of the passage in which the Buddha says,

“A being who has not been your mother at one time in the past is not easy to find.... A being who has not been your father ... your brother.... your sister.... your son.... your daughter at one time in the past is not easy to find. Why is that? From an inconceivable beginning comes transmigration.”

When you think about how difficult each of these relationships can be, it's no surprise that the Buddha didn't say this to make you feel warmhearted to all the beings you meet. He said it to induce *samvega*:

“Long have you thus experienced stress, experienced pain, experienced loss, swelling the cemeteries—enough to become disenchanted with all fabricated things, enough to become dispassionate, enough to be released.” — SN 15:14-19

Even the debts of gratitude you owe to yourself for the good actions you've done are enough to induce a sense of dis-ease. You know that not all your past intentions have been skillful, and yet these are the things that will shape the conditions of your life now and into the future. You're in a precarious position—enough to make you want to find a way out even of the network of kindness and gratitude that sustains whatever goodness there is in the world.

This desire grows even stronger when you allow your empathy to spread to those who have had to make unwilling sacrifices to keep you alive. Every day,

the Buddha advised, you should reflect on the fact that life depends on the requisites of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. Many are the beings who have had to die and suffer other hardships because of your need for these things. Contrary to the song that concludes Mahler's Fourth Symphony, lambs don't gleefully jump into the stewpot to feed you. And even if—when you're in the fortunate position to be able to decide what kind of food you eat—you adhere to a vegetarian diet, you still owe an enormous debt to the farmers and workers who have had to slave under harsh conditions to provide the requisites you need.

The sense of indebtedness that these reflections induce goes far beyond gratitude, and is certainly not pleasant to think about. This may be why so many people try to deny that they owe anyone a debt of gratitude at all. Or why those who *do* encourage the contemplation of gratitude as a source of happiness tend to reduce it to a generic sense of appreciation and contentment—in the words of one writer, “wanting what you have,” “knowing that you have, and are, enough”—devoid of any sense of debt. Gratitude of this sort tends to focus on things, because gratitude to things is so much easier than gratitude to benefactors. Things don't make demands. They don't suffer, and they don't mix their kindness with abuse.

Yet there's no getting around the fact that our very lives depend on the kindness and hardships of others, and that we can't get out of the resulting debts by callously denying them or blithely wishing them away. If we don't repay them now, we'll have to repay them—sometimes at high interest—later, for even death doesn't erase our debts or free us from coming back to incur more.

So to avoid these entanglements, we need another way out—a way the Buddha found through training his mind to reach a happiness that no longer needs to depend on the kindness and sacrifices of others. And although this happiness provides an escape, it isn't escapist. It settles your debts in a responsible and generous way.

This is because unconditional happiness allows you to abandon the cravings and attachments through which you repeatedly take on the identity of a being. To identify yourself as a being means having to find food—both physical and mental—to keep that identity going. This is why, when you're a being, you need to depend on a network of kindness, gratitude, and sacrifice. But when you can abandon the need for that identity, the mind no longer has to feed. It's no longer a burden to anyone. As for the body, as long as you're still alive, those who provide for its needs reap merit many times over for the gifts they provide. This, in fact, is one of the motivations for gaining awakening:

“We will undertake & practice those qualities that make one a contemplative... so that the services of those whose robes, alms-food, lodging, and medicinal requisites we use will bring them great fruit & great reward.” — MN 39

At the same time, the example of your behavior and freedom of mind is a gift to others, in that it shows how they, too, can free themselves from their debts. This is why the Buddha said that only those who have attained full awakening eat the alms food of the country without incurring debt. They've even paid off their debt to the Buddha for having taught the way to release. As he said, the only homage he requested was that people practice the Dhamma in line with the

Dhamma—i.e., to develop the disenchantment and dispassion that lead to release (DN 16; SN 22:39-42)—so that the world will not be empty of awakened people. In this way, attaining full release is not a selfish act; instead, it's the highest expression of kindness and gratitude.

Of course, it's a rare person who will take this route to freedom, but that doesn't lessen its value or relevance. As with gratitude and benefaction, it's an opportunity to become rare and distinctive that's open to anyone with the discernment to appreciate it and the determination to become truly kind and debt-free.