

## *Gratitude to Things*

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We live in a society where people tend to take things for granted. It's one of the drawbacks of having a lot of creature comforts to the point where they seem normal and we don't notice them anymore. This taking things for granted tends to grow into a sense of entitlement. Not only do we have good things, but we feel that we *should* have good things and we get upset when we don't. Some people have begun realizing the problem here, recommending that we cultivate gratitude for the things we have. But they're not talking about gratitude *for* the things, but gratitude *to* the things. You're grateful to your house for sheltering you; you're grateful to your bed for supporting you, for giving you comfort.

I've seen many articles written on the topic and have heard people talking about this many, many times, that we should be grateful to the things that provide us with comfort. But that's not the Buddha's take. Gratitude, he says, is not to things, it's to people, to beings who've made choices. The Pali words for the two sides of gratitude are *kataññu katavedita*: *Kataññu* means literally knowing what was done. *Katavedita* means wanting to respond for what's been done for you. This is an entirely different dynamic. Instead of being grateful to the bed, you're grateful to the person who built the bed and did a good job of building it, or to the person who bought it for you to use.

Here at the monastery, you're grateful to all the people who've given the many things we have here that make it possible for us to practice—beginning with the land, then the buildings, and then all the things in the buildings. These have all been provided through someone's skillful intention, someone's compassionate motives, someone's generosity.

The reason that this is an important distinction—that you're grateful to the people *for* the things, rather than being grateful *to* the things themselves—is that if you feel gratitude to your bed, it's hard not to get attached to your bed, and to think that the goodness lies in the bed as a thing. Whereas if you're grateful to people, you realize that the goodness lies in the action, the intention behind the action that gave the bed or made the bed. That helps you reflect that our society is held together not by good things, but by good intentions.

We see this in our country right now. We've got plenty of good things, but more and more, there's a lack of good intentions. No one appreciates what other people have done. They take it for granted. That it makes it hard for people to want to do good things. You feel underappreciated; you feel that nobody cares.

And you wonder, “Why should I be doing good things for other people when they don’t appreciate it, when they don’t feel gratitude?” This is how a lack of gratitude causes society to unravel. Real civilization doesn’t lie in having good things. It lies in having good intentions for one another.

Ajaan Fuang tells a story of Ajaan Mun when he was living out in the forest. He’d need a spittoon, so he’d get a coconut shell and make it into his spittoon. Someone once complained to him that this was a lowly thing so they wanted to provide him with something better: a nice ceramic spittoon. He said, “Wait a minute, which is higher and which is lower here? The coconut shell comes from high up on the tree; the ceramic comes from dirt.”

The idea of high or low things, of good or bad things, is largely a matter of convention. It’s good to have your conventions turned upside down every now and then, so that you realize that they are conventions and you can begin to see what truly distinguishes between good and not good. The real distinction lies in the intention: the intention to do what is skillful, the intention to be compassionate, the intention to help one another. Those are the good things that keep society functioning.

And it goes further. When you think about the goodness that has gone into, say, your bed or your hut, it spurs you to action. After all, the goodness lies in the action. You realize that somebody had to put forth an effort either to do a good job in making the hut, or to provide the resources to make the hut. If someone bought it specifically for you, you have to be grateful for their intention to help you.

Then you ask yourself, “What am I doing with their good intentions? Am I just wallowing in the comfort, or am I actually trying to create some goodness on my own to dedicate to them?” As the Buddha said, this is one of the motivations for actually becoming an arahant, so that all the good things that people have done for you will bear them great fruit. The purer your mind, the greater the merit they’ll gain from their donation, from their generosity.

So reflecting on where the goodness really lies—i.e. in the action—helps spur you on to good actions of your own. This is why the Buddha said that gratitude is a sign of a good person. You see the good that other people have done, you have a strong appreciation of how difficult it is to do good, and you also have a strong sense of what’s to be treasured in people’s doing good. A person like that is more likely to do good him or herself.

So in this way, instead of getting you attached to objects, gratitude spurs you on to do more good things.

Then you think a little bit further: that these good things we use have to come through suffering. Some of the people or beings involved in this process did so willingly, and others were not so willing—like the animals who become our food or the workers who work in less than ideal conditions to make the things we use. There's suffering involved in all of our material possessions in one form or another. So this spurs you even further: Can you get the mind to a point where it doesn't have to come back and use material things again, again and again? The simple fact of our being born means that we come in with a huge gaping hole: the need for food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. Which means that our lives depend on suffering, not only our own, but also that of other beings.

This contemplation spurs you even further to try to find a way out. What is the escape from this burdensome process? How can we find a happiness that doesn't depend on other people's suffering, other beings' suffering?

So when you think of the goodness around you, it's not the goodness in the things. It's the goodness in the actions. You appreciate the things you have. You take good care of them. But the gratitude is for the people and the beings who made those things, bought those things, provided those things for you to use. Your way of repaying them is to practice, to do good yourself in being generous, being virtuous, meditating—particularly in meditating. As I've said, the purer your mind, the more merit goes to the people who provided the things that made it possible for you to practice. When your mind reaches ultimate purity, then you don't have to come back and be a burden for anyone anymore.

So try to keep this distinction between appreciation and gratitude in mind. Both of them help us get past our tendency to take things for granted and to overcome our childish sense of entitlement. But it's important that you be clear on where they're different: Appreciation is for the things; gratitude is for the actions, because that focuses you on *your* actions, what you're going to do in response.

That's how gratitude keeps you focused on the practice.