

Generosity & Gratitude

August 11, 2012

Every night we have the chant on developing thoughts of goodwill.

We start with goodwill for ourselves, although it's interesting that the discussions of this topic in the Canon never talk about what order you should do this in. It's only in the later texts where they say that you should start with yourself, then go to people who've been kind to you, people who've been good to you, your parents, other benefactors. Then move on to people you like, people you're neutral about, and finally people you don't like. That's one way of doing it.

But it's also good to vary it, because ultimately you want to be able to spread thoughts of goodwill to all without exception. The image is of a conch-shell trumpet that you blow, and everybody all around hears it. Regardless of whether you like them or not, they all get to hear the trumpet. In the same way, regardless of whether you like people or not, they should benefit from your goodwill. Now, to help with the heart quality that goes with that, sometimes it's good to start with people who've benefitted you, people for whom you're grateful or people for whom you should cultivate gratitude, people you've tended to forget about.

When I was in Thailand, especially in the early years, I had whole days to myself meditating. There would be days when I tried to think of all the teachers I'd had, from all the way from first grade on up—where they might be now, many of them are probably dead—and to think of what I owed to them. It would take a full morning. It was a good exercise, to reflect on the fact that where you are right now in your life is the result of a lot of people's goodness.

When the Buddha taught the teaching on karma, he mentioned, "There is mother and father"—which, of course, sounds obvious, but it was a controversial topic back in those times. By saying there is or there isn't mother and father, you were saying whether your parents were owed any specific debt of gratitude. When they said there isn't mother and father, they meant that human beings were just chemical elements that happened to combine and then give rise to your body and that was it. There's no special virtue there. You don't owe them any real debt, either because they were just material things or because what they did was totally predetermined. They had no choice in the matter.

So when the Buddha was saying there *is* mother and father, he was saying that you're not just the physical body, and your parents aren't just their physical bodies. At the same time, they did have freedom of choice: They could have aborted you; they could have abandoned you. The fact that you have a body, that you are a human being right now, depends on the goodness of your parents. Whether they were good at raising you, you still owe them a debt of gratitude.

Then there are people who raised you. Sometimes those weren't your parents: Think of all the special kindnesses they did for you, the ways in which they went out of their way.

This is what makes human life valuable and gives nobility to human life: the fact that people have gone out of their way for one another. It should inspire us, too, to go out of our way. It feels really good when you find yourself in a position where you can give when you don't have to. That's something to be honored. And it's okay to feel good about yourself in that way—not in the sense of trying to compare yourself as being better than other people, but simply that you feel good in and of yourself, that you've done something good for other beings when you didn't have to. It's a sign that you're not a slave to material things or to your convenience.

This is why the Buddha also mentioned generosity when he was discussing karma. There is a virtue to being generous, because again, you're not forced by fatalistic forces to do that. You have the choice. The Buddha wants you to appreciate the fact that you do have that choice, to reflect on how good it feels when you're generous in ways where you don't have to be. These two go together. Gratitude teaches us that we're here because of the generosity of others, and that should inspire us to be generous in turn.

Thinking about these things gives energy to your practice. You're not here just for stress reduction. You're here to develop good qualities of mind. You're looking for a happiness that's harmless. That, in and of itself, is a gift. Think of all the different ways you've gone through life looking for happiness in which you've actually harmed other people. We don't like to think about it. People tend to get very defensive when you bring it to their attention that their happiness depends on other people's suffering, and they do everything they can to justify it. They say, "Those people don't matter," or, "They're not really suffering," or, "That's just got to be the way it is." Well, it doesn't. You have the choice to look for happiness in a way that's totally harmless. That, too, is worthy of respect.

When you meditate, it is a noble activity. Look at the Buddha image here, think of the different images you've seen in different places of worship, and what they say simply by their posture and expression. This one says that you can find true happiness by looking within. Here is an example. And you can do it by developing qualities that are totally harmless.

This is one of the ways in which you repay your debt to all those you've had to depend on in the past, whether you can remember the debt or not; all the people who've benefited you in one way or another, whether you've met them or not. This is one of the reasons why, at the end of the meditation, you always want to dedicate the merit of the meditation to others, to remind yourself that this isn't just about you. It's your gift to everybody, and it's in this atmosphere of generosity and gratitude that the practice flourishes.