

THE PLACE OF THANKFULNESS IN BUDDHISM

By Ven. Dr. Henepola Gunaratana

Thankfulness or gratitude is the mother of virtues. That is what Cicero, the greatest of Roman orators, calls it. And because it is the greatest of virtues, the Buddha has classified the grateful man as one of the 'three persons... hard to find in the world'. He said, "The appearance of a Tathagata... a Fully Enlightened One... a person who can expound the Dhamma-Discipline taught by the Tathagata and a person who is mindful and grateful are hard to be found in the world."

The frailty of man is that he tends to forget a good turn or favour done him but remember even to his dying day a small benefit he has bestowed on others. In the true Buddhist way of life, it should be the other way – to forget a favour or good deed, however big, you have done for others but to remember whatever kind act or gift, however small, that others have bestowed on you. According to Benjamin Franklin, that famous American statesman, inventor and author, 'to the generous mind the heaviest debt is that of gratitude, when it is not in our power to repay it'.

Buddhism lays great emphasis on the subject of thankfulness. For when a person is thankful he has more thoughts of others and less of self; he cultivates selflessness which is one of the basic Buddhist teachings – the eradication of the ego.

The Ven. Dr. Gunaratana indicates in this article how children should show gratitude to their parents, devotees to their spiritual guides, students to their teachers, and monks to their lay supporters. The Reverend is no stranger to us, for he was a resident monk in the Buddhist Vihara, Kuala Lumpur for 10 years, 1959-1969, serving as religious advisor and the Principal of the Sunday School. He is now the president of the Buddhist Vihara in Washington D.C. and its Chief Incumbent. His multifarious activities include lecturing on Buddhism in several universities in the U.S.A.

Ed.

Thankfulness is a natural quality common to all living beings. It can be seen even in the behaviour of animals. Some people know how to express it clearly and distinctly, while others do not. A person who knows how to express thankfulness clearly in thoughts, words and deeds is called a true (**sat**) person (**purisa**). One who does not know how to express it, on the other hand, is called

an untrue man (**a+sat+purisa**). The fact that somebody is unable to express thankfulness does not necessarily mean that he is not thankful. It may be that he is simply not skilful enough to express it. What such a person needs to learn is how to express his thankfulness.

One does not necessarily have to have received a great favour from others in order to be grateful to them. Even a small favour should be remembered with gratitude. This point can be illustrated by citing a famous incident in the life of Sariputta, one of the Buddha's chief disciples.

Once a Brahman approached the monks and asked them to ordain him. His request was denied. As a result the Brahman became so disappointed that he began to lose weight and become very weak and pale. Seeing him in this dejected condition the Buddha asked the monks for the reason. The monks reported what had happened. Thereupon the Buddha called the monks together and asked whether any among them could remember receiving any favour from this poor old Brahman. The Venerable Sariputta spoke up and said he remembered that once he had received a morsel of food from him. The Buddha then praised Sariputta and said: "Very good, Sariputta, very good. Indeed those noble men, Sariputta, are thankful and grateful. Because of this Sariputta, you should ordain this Brahman who is willing to renounce the world".¹

Though thankfulness has been praised and appreciated by many great and holy beings very few people really practise it. Therefore the Buddha put the grateful man in the category of rare persons, saying:

Monks, the appearance of three persons is hard to find in the world. What three?

The appearance of a Tathagata, an Arahant who is a Fully Enlightened One is hard to find in the world. Likewise a person who can expound the Dhamma-Discipline taught by the Tathagata and a person who is mindful and grateful are hard to be found in the world.²

The Buddha said: "A noble person, monks, is thankful and mindful of the favours he receives from others. Thankfulness and mindfulness are the characteristics of the noble person."³

¹ Vin. I.55-56

² A.I. 266; III.169.

³ A.I. 61.

From a Buddhist point of view all living beings are related to one another through the process of rebirth (**samsāra**). The Buddha said: “It is not easy, bhikkhus, to find a being who, during this long existence (in **samsāra**), has not at one time been a mother ..., a father ..., a brother ..., a sister ..., a son ..., a daughter .”⁴ All these beings have received some favour from one another. Therefore all beings should be grateful to one another.

However, it is impossible for anyone to remember all the favours he has received from others and to show his gratefulness to every other living being. Therefore the Buddha has pointed out that human beings should show special gratitude towards their present parents, spiritual teachers, supporters, relatives, friends, employers, workers, neighbours whomsoever they receive favours from no matter how small.

Children should be deeply indebted to their parents for bringing them into this world and raising them sometimes even at the risk of their own lives. The Buddha said that parents are the first teachers who are like Brahma, the highest deity in Indian mythology. Buddhist literature records that the Buddha was so grateful to his mother that he went to the heaven where she was reborn after her death and preached to her the Dhamma that he had realized. He preached the Dhamma to his father and made him realise the truth which eventually brought his **samsāric** suffering to an end.

Children should be grateful to their parents. If the parents commit wrongful acts the children should prevent them from continuing. They should encourage parents to perform wholesome acts. If the parents do not have faith the children should do what is necessary to establish them in faith. If the parents are unethical, the children should advise them to follow moral principles. If the parents do not learn the good teaching children should provide them with opportunities to do so. If the parents are not generous, the children should encourage them to be generous. If parents do not meditate to improve their wisdom the children should encourage them to meditate. If the parents are treading the right path grateful children follow their example. In this way children show their gratitude to their parents in a most pragmatic manner in their daily life.

⁴ “Na so bhikkave satto sulabharupo, yo na matabhutapubbo imina dighena addhuna..., yo na pitabhutapubbo..., yo na bhatabhutapubbo..., yo na bhaginibhutapubbo..., yo na puttabhutapubbo..., yo na dhitabhutapubbo imina dighena addhuna.” S.II. 189-90.

The Buddha has advised us to be grateful to our teachers – both those who show us the way to material success and those who guide us on the spiritual path. We are advised to show great thankfulness to our spiritual teachers because it is they who teach us how to eliminate suffering without expecting any material benefit from us in return. The students, therefore, should be obedient to their teachers, leading the spiritual life strictly in accordance with the moral and ethical guidelines they prescribe. They should attend to all their teachers' needs and create a peaceful atmosphere for the teachers to continue their spiritual practice smoothly.

Teachers on their part should show their gratitude to students who are obedient, diligent and mindful by giving them proper instructions at the proper time, by preventing them from falling into wrong practices, and by reminding them of their subject of meditation.

Monks should be grateful to their lay supporters always remembering that they are dependent upon them for support. Buddha has advised bhikkus (Buddhist monks) to show their gratitude to lay supporters by guiding them through the Dhamma and directing them to the right path if they go astray. The bhikkhus should preach the Dhamma to them whenever opportune, after meals, when they are sick and distressed, at grief-stricken moments, as well as when they are healthy and mindful. While living an exemplary life the monks should give their lay supporters the gift of the Dhamma which excels all other gifts.

In order to be thankful and mindful a bhikkhu should live a holy and noble life. His conduct should be pure and blameless, he should be meditative and cultivate loving and compassionate thoughts towards those who support him. If he lives an exemplary life lay people will want to associate with him, appreciate his way of life, and be encouraged to learn the way he follows. While learning the noble way of a monk they listen to the Dhamma. Listening to the Dhamma arouses confidence in them. With confidence they memorize the Dhamma. Then they investigate the meaning of what they have memorized. As the meaning of the Dhamma becomes clear they observe mindfully the whole phenomenal existence and become always mindful. Continuous and consistent mindfulness brings about further clear comprehension of all phenomena. The clear knowledge of all phenomenal existence gives rise to sense restraint which in turn leads to restraint in thought, words and deeds. This triple discipline helps him eliminate the hindrances. The mind free from the hindrances can eliminate ignorance and attain perfect wisdom or enlightenment. Therefore the thankful person is to be sought out and associated with by all means. He is the one who makes the world happy by helping people eliminate suffering.

The lay devotees on the other hand should support the Sangha, the community of monks and nuns by providing the monks and nuns with their material requisites, such as food, robes, shelter and medicine. The dispensation of the Buddha thrives through their mutual support. Reciprocity in exchanging thankfulness is the best support and encouragement for both. Therefore the whole relationship between the bhikkhus and lay devotees rests on their mutual gratefulness.

Similarly, for our peaceful co-existence in society, we should be thankful to our relatives, friends, employers, helpers, and neighbours. Since gratefulness brings peace and happiness the Buddha advised us to cultivate it. “May you all be thankful and live long in heaven”,⁵ says the Buddha. The thankful person lives happily and peacefully in this present life and goes to heaven after death. Peace and happiness are heavenly blessings that the thankful person enjoys in this life itself. Therefore thankfulness is a source of heavenly bliss.

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“Sabbe katannuno hotha, ciram saggamhi thassatha.” J. III. 287