

Gratitude (1 of 5) Ecology of Gratitude

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Welcome to this first five-part series on gratitude.

Gratitude is a Buddhist topic. One of the nice things about gratitude is that with other foundational practices of Buddhism – generosity and ethics – it puts us more closely connected to a healthy relationship with other people. Gratitude that's sincere is a beautiful way to be in relationship with others. It helps us establish healthy relationships. In addition to being ethical (not causing harm), and working for the benefit of people, which both benefit our relationships, gratitude is a foundational practice.

Sincere gratitude is a wonderful leavening for our society and our communities. It's a wonderful sharing of our hearts with other people. It's a wonderful way to see and acknowledge other people for whom we are grateful.

The Buddha has a wonderful teaching about gratitude. There are four qualities of a person who is wise and skillful, a good person who maintains self without causing any self-harm, who is blameless, and beyond reproach from the wise. These qualities generate much merit. The only way the Buddha defines merit or describes it is with the word “happiness.” It's almost synonymous. A person generates much happiness.

The Buddha teaches that four things – four actions, four ways of living – by which the wise maintain themselves as good persons. What four? Goodness in bodily conduct, goodness in verbal conduct, goodness in mental conduct, and gratitude and thankfulness. Possessing these four qualities, one generates much happiness.

This goodness in conduct is more than just being ethical. It's being generous. It's doing all kinds of beneficial things for oneself and for others. There's a goodness, a healthiness, a beneficence a benevolence, and a beauty. One of the words for good actions that the Buddha uses is “beautiful actions.” So there is doing these beautiful things, and one of them has its own category: being grateful and thankful.

There are two words here, because the word for “grateful” in Pali, *katha-anu*, would have almost a literal English translation of “acknowledgement.” It's knowing what has been done for us, but knowing it as a special thing, being grateful for it, being appreciative of it, and valuing it. The other word, “thankfulness,” at least in Pali, denotes the feeling, the emotional impact of being grateful. “Grateful” is what goes out towards the person, the thing that we're grateful for. It can be an expression of gratitude, the acknowledgement of what has been done. “Thankfulness” is the feeling, the emotional impact of being grateful.

So there are two directions in which gratitude goes. It goes outward to what we're grateful for, and inward to the heartwarming effect. This is the inspiring aspect – the goodness, the smile that we're given, the smile of the heart. When something nice happens, we receive goodness. We receive both benefit and inspiration. We appreciate both directions.

Sometimes, however, thankfulness is only in the direction of others or to the object that we're receiving. It can be a calculation, a duty, or a custom to be thankful. It's only tongue deep, we might say. But if it's only taking it in for ourselves – “Ah, that's great, I feel so much pleasure, it's so nice, it's so wonderful” – then it doesn't enter into the world of our relationships. It doesn't have the richness of our interpersonal life, which is a huge part of the heart itself.

The heart is not distinct from our interpersonal life. To have a gift go in both directions is a beautiful thing. This points to the ecology of gratitude. I want to discuss a few things that are part of the ecology of gratitude.

The first part of gratitude has to do with what we receive from the world or other people. We appreciate that we've benefited from someone or something. We appreciate that we've benefited from the clean air (maybe, if we can) – the clean air that we can breathe, or that we can breathe at all. We feel the benefit of receiving food. There are all these people who work hard in their lives to provide us with the benefits that keep us fed, hydrated, and able to navigate this world, providing the internet and technology so that we can be doing this wonderful 7 a.m. together.

So the first level of external gratitude is to acknowledge the benefits and goodness that comes to us from something.

The second level is to recognize how it comes to us – the intention, or attitude, or goodness that it comes from. If someone offers us something out of duty, for example, if someone in a store is paid to be a door opener and they open the door, it's nice. We can appreciate it and benefit from it. But if we're struggling physically – maybe we're on crutches or something – and someone goes out of their way to show up and open the door for us ... they don't have to do this, but they really care about us. They want to support us. They have some compassion or friendliness or kindness. You can feel there's so much more than a motive of being paid. They are doing this nice thing for you. There's this goodness that comes from them. There's friendliness. There's much more being given than the door being opened. We're being given someone's inner goodness. We're given someone's love, friendliness, goodwill. And so the gratitude we feel has a different quality based on how much people are giving of themselves. They're giving something of their own heart.

Another consideration is, is the action being done specifically for us? Sometimes a person might be very generous. They want to help a lot of people, and they do many things. A person maybe cooks a big meal because they want you and other people to be well-fed. But they don't know who you are. And they leave when they finish doing their cooking. They have done what they could, and they have other things to do. And so you hear that this wonderful person has benefited you and has done it with a lot of goodness in their heart. But they actually don't know you, and maybe you don't know them.

In another situation, the act hasn't been done specifically for you, but maybe the person cooks the food and then comes out and actually hands it to you and says, "Thank you for being here. I'm so glad to be able to cook for you." They're thanking you. Now there's a personal connection. So there could be different levels of relating.

Another experience may be one that can touch us the most. There's a risk that a gift can get complicated with a sense of obligation. We can distinguish gratitude for an offering that someone offers to us, from a favor. At least in my experience, a favor sometimes needs to be returned. It's more of an exchange. But an offering is a gift that someone gives us – for example, a gift of opening the door, or a gift of some food, or a gift of their time – that is not meant to be a favor. It's just a gift for you to have.

How deeply receiving a gift goes into us can vary. That's the second half of the ecology of gratitude –how it moves into us. We can know that we've been benefited. There can be a recognition and an inspiration in the mind. A light goes off in the mind. "Wow, that's great." But our response can also be more of a thought – an idea, an understanding. It can also travel into our heart and into our emotional life. We can feel softer, inspired. We can feel a smile throughout our chest. We can feel love. We can feel delight. We can feel a wish of *metta* – of goodwill and kindness – for the person who does something for us. Something in us melts sometimes. Something is inspiring. Sometimes we can be brought to tears when someone does something exceptional to us when they don't have to. And so it can go deeper.

At some point in this inner ecology of gratitude, we speak out of it. We speak thanks. We don't just keep it to ourselves. There's something that brings gratitude to a kind of fullness when we speak it. "Thank you." The culture that I grew up in is a gratitude culture, as I understand it. In Norway, there are many expressions of thanks that are given. It seems like all day long people are saying "Thank you" for something.

If you see a friend, when you first meet, you'll say, "Thanks for last time." When you finish seeing them and you're going to say goodbye, one of your expressions is "Thanks for now." Or thanks for the food. Thanks for all kinds of things.

To allow the circle and relatedness of gratitude to be complete or full, we speak it or act it in some way. And that's a third thing. We can offer an act in return – not out of obligation or duty but because of the inspiration we have. Now we feel a sense of abundance and goodness. We feel a sense of this relationship that now has a beautiful channel in it – the channel of communication and connectedness – that can be the vehicle for wonderful generosity from our part that satisfies or meets these three parts of generosity that others can do towards us.

We can do something beneficial for someone. We do it because it really comes from our goodness, generosity, and love. And it can be specifically for someone else.

When I went to practice in Japan, I learned – especially in the monasteries – that when you give something to someone, you give it to them with both hands. When I studied with some of the Zen masters in Japan and the United States who were influenced by Japanese culture – for example, I studied with Robert Aiken Roshi in Hawaii – in order to become a student, you had to do a formal little ceremony and ask to be a student. You also had to give him a gift of money. There were very particular instructions about the money you had to give him. It had to be \$3 – three \$1 bills. They had to be brand new \$1 bills. They had to be in a nice envelope. And you had to hand the envelope to him with both hands.

The amount of money was incidental. But the whole approach to how it's offered to him with care – not the dollar bills all crumpled up into a ball and thrown at him – but it's offered with care, respect, and an honoring of him with giving him something beautiful – the new dollar bills, the nice new envelope, the care in offering it.

The three beautiful qualities of gratitude we offer will benefit someone. The motivation comes from our heart. And we do it personally. And when we are on the receiving end, we can take it in with acknowledgement of what's happened. We can feel the goodness of it. We can offer thanks. And we can return the act through our gratitude.

Maybe these ideas will give you something to think about. For this day, think about the richness and the relatedness of gratitude. And then I'll continue with this theme on this designated Gratitude Week in the United States.

Thank you.