

Gratitude (3 of 5) Expressing Gratitude

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Welcome to this third talk on gratitude. I present a little bit about the different aspects – the dynamics of gratitude – which I call the ecology of thankfulness or gratitude. This ecology begins with the cognitive aspect of appreciating and acknowledging something. In Buddhism, one of the words for gratitude can more literally be translated into English as “acknowledgment,” acknowledgment of what has been done for us. There is “thankfulness,” which is the feeling we have. We can take in a moment – or a year, or even a lifetime – the experience and the feeling of well-being that comes from gratitude. We open up to it and let it register. A reason to do this is not just to indulge in those feelings, but rather the gratitude becomes more whole that way.

When we say “Thank you” or we bow, there is much more embodiment behind it, more that’s here. There is more that’s offered in return. If I just keep walking and wave my hand in thanks, I don’t know if it’s really going to touch someone else. It can be seen as incidental, casual, or unimportant. But to stop with a person and maybe hold their hands or bow and say, “Thank you,” is to really feel it so that it can be embodied.

The aspect I want to emphasize today is the way we express gratitude. This is an extremely important thing. Not only for the person you’re saying thank you to, but I believe it’s important for us. This is one of the things I learned from my years of monastic practice. There was something about deep appreciation and welling up of gratitude that happened to me day after day through all the meditation I did. There was something about the experience, goodness, and well-being of meditation that I felt so grateful and appreciative. There was something inside of me that needed to express it. Otherwise it was bottled up and restricted. It didn’t really have a life. It couldn’t come to its fullness.

One of the reasons I like to bow at the end of meditation is that it gives a life, an acknowledgment. It allows a movement that’s happening inside of me to live and have its fulfillment. That is the deep feeling of appreciation, of gratitude. And in return, I think it also then changes me. It inculcates or reinforces that side of myself. During my years of monastic practice, we did a lot of bowing. And I didn’t always want to bow. It wasn’t always out of appreciation. But after a while, there was something about putting my hands together and bowing – even when I didn’t want to – that had an effect on me. It was a gratitude posture that little drop by drop actually did something to me. In the monastery we always bowed to each other whenever we passed each other. When I had left the monastery after three years there, I was walking down the street in the city of Berkeley nearby. The first day out of the monastery, I was passing all these people on the sidewalk. And I just wanted to bow to them all. But, you know, they were strangers and I thought that would be weird. Luckily, I saw down the street someone who had visited the monastery at some point during the summer. I went running after her. I think I said, “Stop, wait!” It was really that I just wanted to have someone to bow to so I could express my gratitude for all the people who were there, and give my gratitude life.

When we express gratitude, we can certainly do it with a “thank you” in words. But let the words be embodied, not just casual. Stop and say it in a good way, in the fullness of it. So it’s not just the words, but it’s also the gestures you use. If they are people who don’t know about bowing, you don’t want to do that to them. Maybe it’s weird for them. But a little nod, a stopping and looking at them. There’s some movement of the hand that can express your feeling. Maybe sometimes “Thank you” opening your hands wide. In the old days, men would tip their hats. They’d express a little bit more of a gesture. So what’s a possible gesture as an embodiment? It could be stopping physically and turning towards the person and saying, “Thank you.” There are wonderful photographs and videos of the Dalai Lama going over to people whom he sees, bowing and holding their hands, and just being completely with them for those few minutes like they’re the most important person. I don’t know if he’s expressing gratitude, but there’s something deep because he’s really there. The Dalai Lama has changed so many people just by how he greets people.

You might want to give something, a gratitude gift. "I want to thank you for what you did for me. And here's a small gift." Not a big gift that makes people obligated to return something. Maybe we bake something and give it to them. "I baked this for you, please accept it." Or, "Here are some flowers. I want to thank you for the favor you did me and the support you offered." A little expression of gratitude so it's more embodied and unfolding. It means so much more.

Another thing I think about is that sometimes it's useful to go out of your way to say thank you. Show up, go see someone, and walk up to them and say, "I just wanted to take the time to say thank you." It's clear to them you're going out of your way. You go into their office or you walk down the hall. "I'm here just to say thank you. Thank you." Or you go to a neighbor and knock on the door and say, "You know, I just want to say thank you for yesterday. It was really nice to be invited over for dinner." It doesn't have to include a gift. It's just, "That's all I wanted to say." And you go out of your way.

So again, expressing gratitude is something deeper in us. It's not just a casual "Thank you." It's like we're investing something; we're doing something. I'd like to suggest that this way of living in gratitude is a way of letting flow in a healthy way the love or gratitude or dynamic aspect of human relationships. The cycles of giving and receiving, generosity and gratitude – they just keep flowing and moving.

This is just like all the elements within us. For example, the water that we have comes and goes. Some water molecules that are in us now, probably were there in the time of the Buddha or all kinds of wonderful, compassionate people in the past. So much. And it keeps flowing out of us. Our water now will probably be in some other human being or animal or being in the future, maybe in thousands or millions of years. And we want to just keep it flowing, keep it moving, keep it going smoothly.

And so it is with our human relationships – the dynamism of love, care, and friendship. Keep it flowing. One of the ways to do that is to express gratitude. Sometimes when we neglect to do that, something stops. It stops with us. And maybe it never continues again. So keep it going. Pass it on through how you say "Thank you."

So for all of you, thank you very much for today. We will continue this topic of gratitude. Thank you.