

BUDDHIST CONCEPT FOR TODAY'S LIVING (13)
GRATITUDE:A HALLMARK OF HUMANITY
GRATITUDE HAS BEEN A VALUED TRAIT IN THE BUDDHIST TRADITION

Gratitude is one of the most profound feelings that we can experience. We extend our kindness to another person who in turn responds with sincerity and appreciation. Such reciprocity, unlike in a commercial transaction, is free and spontaneous.

It is ironic that in many fables the virtue of gratitude is often assigned to animals, perhaps to parody the animality that lies beneath our human appearance. For example, Aesop tells the tale of a grateful eagle. A plowman one day saves an eagle trapped in a net. Later the eagle sees the plowman in danger of being crushed by a collapsing wall and snatches the plowman's headband. When the provoked plowman chases after the eagle, he is led to safety.¹

Nichiren Daishonin begins his lengthy treatise "On Repaying Debts of Gratitude" by citing the Chinese legend of Mao Pao and the white turtle (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 690). One day Mao Pao sees a fisherman about to kill a white turtle. He takes pity on the turtle and gives his own clothes to the fisherman in exchange for the turtle. Years later the turtle saves Mao Pao's life by ferrying him across the Yangtze River away from pursuing enemies. The Daishonin states: "If even lowly creatures know enough to do this, then how much more should human beings!" (WND, 690). The gratitude shown by animals in those tales reminds us of how easily we can overlook this very virtue that makes us human.

Gratitude has been a valued trait in the Buddhist tradition. In the collection of tales about Shakyamuni's past existences called *The Jataka*, he is often depicted as an embodiment of kindness and compassion while Devadatta, Shakyamuni's adversary, is described as an ingrate. One *Jataka* tale goes as follows: Once a magnificent white elephant (Shakyamuni in a past life) saved the life of a forester (Devadatta) lost in the Himalayas by nourishing him and showing him the way back to the city. Greedy and ungrateful, this forester repeatedly returned to the elephant's abode and begged for its tusks. He said he needed them for money to sustain his life and was given a portion of the tusks each time. When the forester took even the stumps of the elephant's tusks, however, the earth opened up and swallowed the forester into the depths of hell.²

The earth could not support the weight of Devadatta's base ingratitude, and he fell into hell. While some people may view a debt of gratitude as a burdensome obligation, Buddhism teaches that the real burden upon our humanity is ingratitude.

The Buddhist concept of dependent origination explains that everything in this world arises from and is supported by its environment. Everything and everyone is connected. There is no one, therefore, who does not owe a debt of gratitude to others. In this sense, gratitude may be described as our awareness that our lives are supported by our environment, which includes other people, and our desire to respond in kind to such support. Those who are ungrateful or feel burdened by others' kindness fail to see the interconnectedness of all lives. They build walls of ignorance and selfishness around them to isolate themselves from the rest of the world.

The Daishonin states: "One who studies the teachings of Buddhism must not fail to repay the four debts of gratitude" (WND, 43). One Mahayana scripture called the Contemplation on the Mind-Ground Sutra (Jpn *Shinjikan gyo*) explains that we as Buddhists owe a debt of gratitude to all living beings, our parents, the sovereign and the

three treasures of the Buddha, the Buddhist teaching and the Buddhist community. Because of the existence of all living beings, bodhisattvas can fulfill their vow to save them. Without others we cannot practice the Buddhist ideal of altruism. We also owe thanks to our parents who brought us into existence so that we may practice Buddhism. We are indebted to “the sovereign” who represents all the activities of society that ensure our survival. In this regard, the Daishonin states: “It is thanks to one’s sovereign that one can warm one’s body...and sustain one’s life with the five kinds of grain” (WND, 44). Furthermore, as practitioners of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism, we owe a debt of gratitude to the Daishonin and his teaching as well as to his immediate disciple and successor Nikko Shonin and to the Buddhist community for transmitting and spreading the Daishonin’s Buddhism.

Repaying Debts of Gratitude

The Daishonin teaches that ultimately we can repay the four debts of gratitude by taking faith in the law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and communicating its benefit to others. As he states, “But if one intends to repay these great debts of gratitude, one can hope to do so only if one learns and masters Buddhism, becoming a person of wisdom” (WND, 690). Repaying a debt of gratitude, then, is not a sacrifice or burden; rather, it is an act beneficial for both others and ourselves. Although our parents and those around us may not understand the Daishonin’s Buddhism, it is certainly possible to encourage them with the warmth and humanity we develop through our practice. This is why the Daishonin often urges us to remain steadfast in our faith in the face of opposition.

Gratitude is a hallmark of humanity; it lifts our lives out of ignorance and isolation. But it is difficult to have gratitude for those around us if they act kindly only out of an expectation of reward or a sense of obligation. Also, when people try to manipulate others by granting them favors, the resulting “debt” of gratitude may easily become a burden. Buddhist wisdom, however, enables us to see our essential interconnectedness beyond superficial social obligations. Through our Buddhist practice we expand our capacity to express gratitude and can even transform hostility into a cause for personal development. Thus from his exile to the Izu Peninsula, the Daishonin states: “Moreover, in this lifetime, I have taken faith in the Lotus Sutra and encountered a ruler who will enable me to free myself in my present existence from the suffering of birth and death. Thus how can I dwell on the insignificant harm that he had done me and overlook my debt to him?” (WND, 44).

As we develop a perspective and capacity to see even hardship in a positive light, we can experience a sense of gratitude for something beyond immediate give-and-take and deepen our humanity. Devadatta failed to prevent Shakyamuni from acting kindly, and the shogunate government could not make the Daishonin bitter. From these examples, we can see that negative circumstances do not have to make us feel ungrateful.

By Shin Yatomi, associate editor, based on *Yasashii Kyogaku* (Easy Buddhist Study), published by the Seikyo Press in 1994.

1. *Aesop: The Complete Fables*. Trans. Olivia and Robert Temple. London: Penguin, 1998. p. 64.
2. *The Jataka* or Stories of the Buddha’s Former Births. Ed. E.B. Cowell. Trans. Robert Chalmers. First published by the Cambridge University Press, 1895. Reprinted by Motilal Banarsidass, 1990. Vol. 1. pp. 174-77.