

GRATITUDE

in the Buddha's Teaching

Compiled with the
assistance and guidance of
Venerable Nyanadassana Thero

Mahinda Wijesinghe

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“The gift of Dhamma excels all other gifts”

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and guidance of Venerable Nyanadassana Thero.

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C o n t e n t s

INTRODUCTION	01
SUTTAS ABOUT GRATITUDE	05
SUTTAS ABOUT INGRATITUDE	08
GRATITUDE- Article adapted from <i>www.freebuddhistaudio.com</i>	10
ENDNOTES	25



INTRODUCTION

Gratitude is a rare quality in humans. It is the quality of people of integrity, of good and noble character. Ingratitude, on the other hand, seems to be the rule of everyday life, when man displays his baser instincts. The Buddha, in the Suttas that follow, speaks about both and shows the strength of the former and the weakness of the latter.

The strength of the former is exalted in the Maṅgala Sutta, the Sutta of Blessings, where the Buddha declares gratitude to be one of the highest blessings, thus showing how it plays a key role in His ethical and spiritual teachings. His message here is that if you cultivate gratitude, if you are grateful, this is a sign that you are making ethical and spiritual progress, that you are in the process of achieving a highest and rare blessing in life.

The typical weakness of ingratitude, on the other hand, is arrogance and egotism when thinking that whatever one has achieved in life was by one's efforts alone. A modest person realizes that the efforts of many people such as parents, teachers, friends, et al, have served in realizing his noble goals and he feels

grateful to them. He sees the inter-connectedness of his existence. In contrast, an immodest person wishes “Let others think that this was achieved by me alone”, and thus his desire and conceit do but only grow, to the point that he becomes utterly ungrateful, turning his back to his benefactors, even if and when they are in desperate need.

Normally it is difficult to know ungrateful people because they are devious. As the *Rasavāhinī*, a collection of stories in Pāḷi, states:

“The ungrateful speak one thing with their mouth,
Think another with their mind,
Still do another with their body.
This is the nature of vicious people.
He who can know their nature
Is certainly wise and knowledgeable.”

Gratitude, however, is an uncanny and positive attitude of appreciation or thankfulness in acknowledging a benefit that one has received or will receive from others. It is often accompanied by a wish to thank them, or to reciprocate in kind, thinking: “This wasn’t achieved by me alone, but by the help and support of this and that good person”.

Gratitude is called *kataññutā* in Pāḷi, and is generally coupled with *katavedi*. In this combined form, *kataññutā* is the feeling of thankfulness for benefits received or for kindness rendered, whereas *katavedi* is the expression or manifestation of this feeling through words and deeds. Standing alone, *kataññutā* is understood to cover both meanings.

The word *kataññutā* consists of two parts: *kata*, which means that which has been done, especially done to oneself and *kataññutā*, which means knowing, recognizing or acknowledging it, namely, knowing what has been done by others for one’s benefit, prosperity, success and happiness.

Hence, the connotation of the Pāḷi word is rather different from its English equivalent. The connotation of the English gratitude is more emotional but the connotation of *kataññutā* is more intellectual.

This suggests that gratitude involves an element of knowledge, knowledge of what has been done to us or for us. If we do not know that something has benefited us, we’ll not feel grateful.

Psychological research has also suggested that feelings of gratitude may be beneficial to one’s own emotional well-being as well (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). For example, Watkins and colleagues (Watkins et al., 2003) had participants test a number of different gratitude exercises, such as thinking about a living person for whom they were grateful, writing about someone for whom they were grateful, and writing a letter to deliver to someone for whom they were grateful. Participants [A] in the control condition were asked to describe their living room. Participants [B] who engaged in a gratitude exercise showed increases in their experiences of positive emotion immediately after the exercise, and this effect was strongest for participants who were asked to think about a [particular] person for whom they were grateful. Participants who had grateful personalities showed the greatest benefit from these gratitude exercises.

The conclusion was that people who tend to experience gratitude more frequently than do others also tend to be happier, more helpful and forgiving, and less depressed than their less grateful counterparts (Kashdan, Uswatte, & Julian, 2006; McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002; Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003).

May you also by understanding the value of being grateful and cultivating it help you lead a happier and meaningful life.



SUTTAS ABOUT GRATITUDE

Rare persons in the world

“There are two persons who are rare in the world. Which two? First, the one who volunteers to help others selflessly (*pubbakari*). And second, the one who is grateful (*kataññu*) and helps in return (*katavedi*)”.¹

“The appearance of three persons is rare in the world. Which three? The appearance of a Buddha, ... The appearance of a person who can teach the Dhamma and Vinaya proclaimed by the Buddha, ... And the appearance of a person who is grateful (*kataññu*) and helps in return (*katavedi*), is rare in the world.”²

Being Grateful is an Attitude of a Good Person

“A good person (*sappurisa*) is grateful (*kataññu*) and helps in return (*katavedi*). This gratitude, this helping in return is praised by fine people. It is entirely the attitude of a good person.”³

Good Consequences of Being Grateful

“A wise person who is grateful (*kataññu*) and helps in return (*katavedi*); who is a noble friend and has a firm faith in what is good; who attentively serves those in distress; such a

one is called a good person (*sappurisa*). Prosperity does not leave him who is endowed with all these good qualities.”⁴

“Endowed with four things a good person is in heaven as though led and laid there. With what four? With bodily right conduct, with verbal right conduct, with mental right conduct and with gratitude and helping in return (*kataññutā, kataveditā*).”⁵

“By abandoning five vices, one can attain the first jhāna, the second ... the fourth jhāna; one can attain the sotāpattiphala, ... the sakadāgāmi- ... the anāgāmi-phala; one can attain Arahāt-ship. Which five? Stinginess as to one’s residence, stinginess as to one’s supporters, stinginess as to one’s gains, stinginess as to one’s status, ingratitude and not helping in return (*akataññutā, akataveditā*).”⁶

Good Persons Praise Gratitude

“If a person stays in another’s house even for one night and receives food and drinks, he should not even wish evil for the host. Gratitude is what is praised by good persons (*sappurisa*).”⁷

“Whenever prudent people have met a good person
They don’t give up his friendship,
Nor do they spoil the service done to themselves.
The fools, however, give up the friendship,
And they spoil the service done to themselves.
Even a lot of service towards the fools
Is reduced to nothing,
For fools are merely ungrateful.

The wise ones indeed don’t give up the friendship,
Nor do they spoil the service done to themselves.
Even a slight service towards themselves
Is not disowned,
For the wise ones are full of gratitude.”⁸

Being Grateful to the Parents is Praiseworthy

“Parents desire a child to be born in the clan seeing these five needs. What five? Reared it will support us; it will serve us; our clan will last long; it will undertake our heritage; and when dead and gone it will give us merits. The wise seeing these five needs desire a child.

Therefore, decent and good persons who are grateful (*kataññu*) to their parents and want to help them in return (*katavedi*), support their mother and father recalling what they did. They serve them as their own parents served them. Becoming obedient, a child supports the family and clan. And endowed with faith and virtue he is praiseworthy.”⁹





SUTTAS ABOUT INGRATITUDE

Being Ungrateful is an Attitude of a Wicked Person

“A wicked person (*asappurisa*) is ungrateful (*akataññu*), and does not help in return (*akatavedi*). This ingratitude, this not helping in return is praised by vicious people. It is entirely the attitude of a wicked person.”¹⁰

Bad Consequences of Being Ungrateful

“He who has received kindness from others and then harms them with evil, this ungrateful person will not attain prosperity.”¹¹

“He who first receives a service
And accomplishes his business
But does the service done ignore,
When later on he needs a service
He does not obtain a helper.”¹²

“Endowed with four things a foolish, unskilled and wicked person is one who has destroyed his own foundation, is censurable and blamable by the wise, and accumulates a lot of demerit (*apuñña*). With what four? With bodily misconduct, with verbal misconduct, with mental misconduct and with ingratitude and not helping in return (*akataññutā, akataveditā*).”¹³

“Without abandoning five vices, one cannot attain the first *jhāna*, the second ... the fourth *jhāna*; one cannot attain the *sotāpattiphala*, ... the *sakadāgāmi-* ... the *anāgāmi-phala*; one cannot attain Arahathship. Which five? Stinginess as to one’s residence, stinginess as to one’s supporters, stinginess as to one’s gains, stinginess as to one’s status, ingratitude and not helping in return (*akataññutā, akataveditā*).”¹⁴

[On one occasion the Buddha said that ingratitude is one of the four great offences deserving of hell (*niraya*) – **hell** in the sense of rebirth in a state of suffering. So that’s a very serious, a very weighty statement on the part of the Buddha:]

“Endowed with four things a wicked person is in hell (*niraya*) as though led and laid there. With what four? With bodily misconduct, with verbal misconduct, with mental misconduct and with ingratitude and not helping in return (*akataññutā, akataveditā*).”¹⁵

Hopeless service from the Ungrateful

“A service is hopeless from one who has no gratitude
Who does not help in return,
Is ungrateful and apathetic.
His friendship is not won
By the clearest good deed.
One should hastily shun him
With no bitter thought and angry word.”¹⁶

Discontent and the Ungrateful

“Even if one would offer the whole earth
to an ungrateful person, one could not please him.”¹⁷
“Even a lot of service towards the fools
Is reduced to nothing,
For fools are merely ungrateful.”¹⁸



GRATITUDE

(Adapted extracts from an article in

www.freebuddhistaudio.com and acknowledged with gratitude)

To Be Grateful Is Most Blissful

People must always be grateful. Lord Buddha is always full of praise for gratitude. Persons who are always ready to help are rarely found in this world; but rarer still are those who remember and are grateful to those who have helped them. If we are grateful, we are sure to be happy.

Without this quality, a person forgets his parents, relatives, friends, teachers and those who teach him the Dhamma. He turns his back on them just when they could be helped or when they are in need of aid. A selfish person seems to try to isolate himself.

On the other hand, the grateful person makes for harmony and peace. He will always be remembered and loved. Ajahn Chah gave a teaching wherein he said: “The Buddha taught the virtues of *kataññu* and *katavedi*, of knowing our debt of gratitude and trying to repay it. These two virtues are complementary.” That is why the Buddha taught the virtues of *kataññu* *katavedi*, knowing our debt of gratitude and trying to repay it. These two dhammas are complementary. If our parents are in need, unwell or in difficulty, then we should do our best to help them. This is *kataññu* *katavedi*, the virtue that sustains the world. It prevents families from breaking up and makes them stable and harmonious.

Gratitude is a manifestation of faithfulness. It suggests an evenness of behavior as opposed to vanity or haughtiness. An instance of this may be seen in the regular practice of Venerable Sāriputta. One day, he came across the Venerable Assaji, one of the first Five Disciples of Lord Buddha and having been Enlightened by the Elder’s sermon, was converted and later ordained into the monkhood.

The Venerable Sāriputta afterwards became what is called in Pāḷi ‘the right-hand disciple of the Buddha, being respected as having supreme wisdom and exceptional methods of teaching unequalled among all other disciples of the Buddha. He was one of the most valuable helpers of the Buddha in spreading the Dhamma and was generally looked upon as second only to the Buddha. But he remained unwaveringly faithful to his first teacher, the Venerable Assaji, who, although Enlightened, had no special gifts, and always regarded the Elder as his great benefactor, never failing to pay homage to him before he went to rest for the night throughout his life. This aspect of faithfulness, therefore, is an

ennobling virtue for children, pupils, or servants who do not neglect to pay due respect to their parents, teachers and masters, respectively.

Gratitude is also an attitude which involves a feeling of indebtedness towards another person; often accompanied by a desire to thank them, or to reciprocate in kind. The Buddha, for instance, knew that the Bodhi tree had sheltered him. He knew that His five former companions in asceticism had been helpful to Him, so He felt gratitude towards them.

Not only that, He gave expression to that feeling of gratitude. He acted upon it in the first place by spending a whole week – soon after attaining Buddhahood, according to tradition – by simply gazing at the Bodhi tree. And then He went in search of His five former companions of asceticism so that He could communicate to them out of gratitude the Truth that He had discovered. So here there's a very important implication. The implication being that it's natural; it's a perfectly natural thing for a good and noble person to feel gratitude for benefits, which he had received. It's a natural thing, a natural response.

But of course, the benefit has to be recognized as a benefit. If we don't feel that someone or something actually has benefited us, we won't feel grateful to them or to it and this suggests that we have to understand what is truly beneficial, have to understand what has really helped us to grow and develop as human beings. We also have to know who or what has benefited us. We have to remember that they have benefited us otherwise no feeling of gratitude is possible.

The newly Enlightened Buddha we may say was a grateful Buddha. Now we don't usually think of the Buddha in this way. We think of the Fully Enlightened (*sammā Sambuddha*), as a compassionate Buddha, we think of the resourceful Buddha who was a teacher of gods and men, but few think in terms of a grateful Buddha. But the Buddha exemplified gratitude, and one of the very first things, as mentioned earlier, He did after His attainment of Enlightenment was to show His gratitude to those who had helped Him. He was even grateful to the tree that gave him shelter during his final quest for Enlightenment! And this alone should give us quite a lot of food for thought, food for reflection.

And it's therefore not surprising that this quality, this virtue of gratitude finds a place in the Buddha's ethical and spiritual teaching. You've probably all heard of the Maṅgala Sutta, the Sutta of Blessings, or the Sutta of Auspicious Signs as it can also be translated. This particular Sutta, which is very short and is found in the Pāli Canon, is often regarded as summarizing the whole of the duties as we may call it of a serious minded Buddhist, and it mentions gratitude as one of the 38 auspicious signs. *If you practice gratitude, if you are grateful, then it's a sign that you are making spiritual progress according to the Maṅgala Sutta.*

So what is gratitude? What do we mean when we use this term? Turning to the dictionaries, which are very useful, very helpful, and to which we should be grateful, very grateful to the great makers of dictionaries, they define gratitude as “duty to benefactors”, and as “desire to return benefits”. Coming to more modern dictionaries, the Concise Oxford says, “being thankful, readiness to show appreciation for and to return kindness”, and

Collins has “a feeling of thankfulness or appreciation as for gifts or favours”.

So these are the definitions of the English word, and they’re all right as far as they go. They give us some understanding of what gratitude is. But from a Buddhist point of view, we really need to go further. We need to look at the Pāḷi word. And this word, this Pāḷi word, as mentioned earlier, is *kataññutā*.

In Buddhism, traditionally, there are three principal objects of gratitude: In the first place are our parents, next are our teachers, and in the third place our spiritual friends.

First of all, let us take our parents. In the modern era, there have been quite a few reported cases of ill-feeling between parents and their offspring. Of course, if one is on bad terms with one’s parents then something is quite seriously wrong. Perhaps it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that if one is on really bad terms with one’s parents then one’s whole emotional life, indirectly at least, is affected, perhaps quite seriously. This is where the practice of *mettā bhāvana* (meditation on friendliness) helps in re-establishing positive relation with the parents.

One has to learn to develop *mettā*, though some may have suffered at the hands of their parents, but even so, it is necessary in the interests of their own emotional, psychological and spiritual development to get over whatever feelings of bitterness or resentment that they were harbouring towards their parents.

It suggests that negative attitudes towards parents are still fairly widespread in our society. And the Buddha Himself has quite a lot to say about our positive relation to our parents in the

Sigalovada Sutta in the Dīgha Nikāya, the collection of long discourses in Pāḷi. The Buddha is represented there as saying there are five ways in which a son should minister to his mother and father (you notice in Pāḷi it’s always mother and father, never father and mother and that isn’t without significance) as the eastern direction: he should think “Having been supported by them, I will support them, I will perform their duties for them, I will keep up the family tradition, I will be worthy of my heritage, after my parents’ deaths I will distribute gifts on their behalf.”

Of course, the same applies in principle to a daughter. She too should minister to her mother and father as the eastern direction, she too should think in this manner. Now there’s a lot that could be said on the five ways in which one should minister to one’s parents.

The Sigalovada sutta is so called because it is addressed to a young man called Sigalaga who was in the habit of paying homage to the six directions every morning and he was doing this in accordance with the instructions of his dying father. But one morning he met the Buddha, and He explained the real meaning of this young man’s father’s words.

The Buddha explained that one pays homage to the south by ministering to teachers in five ways, one pays homage to the north by ministering to friends and companions in five ways, similarly one pays homage to the east by ministering to one’s parents in five ways. But why the east in the case of one’s parents? Well the reason is perhaps obvious. The sun rises in the east, the sun has its origin in the east so to speak and similarly we owe our origin to our parents, leaving aside of course questions of

karma of which perhaps the parents are only instruments. If it were not for our parents, we would not be here now. Our parents have given us life, they've given us a physical body, have given us a human body.

Not only do our parents give us a human body, they bring us up, well as best they can. They enable us to survive, they educate us, they may not always be able to send us to university and all that, but they teach us to speak, they teach us a language, and this is the basis of most of the things that we subsequently learn. Usually of course, it's our mother who teaches us our first words and it's for this reason that we have the expression in English at least as "our mother tongue". It's through our mother tongue that we first begin to communicate with the world.

Not everybody of course cares to acknowledge their debt to their parents, not everybody unfortunately is grateful to their parents. But why are people so ungrateful? More of it later.

Meanwhile, let us turn to the second of the three principal objects of gratitude in Buddhism, that is to say our teachers. By teachers in this connection, I mean our secular teachers. I don't mean here our Dhamma teachers; I mean all those from whom we derive our secular education, even secular culture.

In this regard, our schoolteachers have obviously an important place. From them we derive the rudiments of such knowledge, such learning as we have, and we therefore have to be grateful to our teachers. The fact is we've found out very little of what we know or what we think we know for ourselves, as a result of our own efforts. Practically everything that we know or think we know has been taught us in one-way or another. If we think of our knowledge of science, our knowledge of history

for example, then few of us have even performed a single scientific experiment or discovered even a single historical fact, which no one else had discovered. Others, so to speak, have done all our work in this field, for us. We have benefited from their efforts. Our knowledge we may say is little more than the echo of theirs. And I'm not just thinking of living teachers. We also learn from books. We learn from people who have been dead for many, many years. We learn from the writings that they've left, from the records of the words that they spoke, so to all of them too we should be grateful.

Moreover, it's not just a question of our learning from them in a purely intellectual sense; not just a question of our acquiring information. Among those books, those books that we read are great works of the imagination. There are poems that are actually works of art, novels by skilled wordsmiths from diverse nationalities keeping successive generations in awe, magnificent edifices that have endured the tide of time and still stun the onlooker, haunting music composed by masters, and so on. These works are a source of infinite enrichment. We would be immeasurably poorer without them. They help us deepen and enlarge our vision. In this regard, we should also be grateful to the great men and women, including painters, sculptors, inventors, composers of great music, and so on. In short, we must be grateful to those who helped create our collective cultural heritage. So much for then for the second principal object of our gratitude, namely, our teachers.

We come now to the third and last objects of our gratitude, that is to say, our spiritual friends. Although there are three

principal objects of our gratitude, they're not completely separate and distinct from one another. There are not mutually exclusive. There's a certain amount of overlap between the first and second, and between the second and third. Our parents are also our teachers to an extent. In Buddhist tradition parents are called *purāṇ'ācaryas*, which means ancient or former teachers because they're the first teachers that we had, even if they only taught us to speak a few words and consequently we're grateful to our parents. Not only for giving us life but also for giving us at least the rudiments of knowledge and for initiating us into at least the beginnings of the basic cultural heritage.

Similarly, there is a certain amount of overlap between teachers and spiritual friends. The very greatest poets, artists and composers can help us rise to spiritual heights. They can inspire us with spiritual values. In the course of the last few hundred years, great changes have taken place, at least in the West. Previously, Christianity as represented by the church or churches was the great bearer of spiritual values, even the sole bearer of spiritual values. But many people have now lost faith in Christianity, lost faith in the church or churches and they look elsewhere for their spiritual values. They find those values in great works of art. They find them in the plays of Shakespeare, they find them in the poetry of Wordsworth, Thomas Gray, and the likes of Robert Burns and Oliver Goldsmith. Or, some find them in the music of Bach, Beethoven and Mozart, still others find them in the great painters and sculptors of the Italian Renaissance and so on.

But now let us come to our spiritual friends proper as we may say. The third principal object of our gratitude, are the spiritual friends. So here too, as in the case of the word gratitude, we have to go back to the Sanskrit word behind the English equivalent. The Sanskrit word or words is *kalyāṇa mitra*. Spiritual friends are *kalyāṇa mitras*. *Mitra* comes from the word *maitri* or *mettā* in Pāḷi, and *maitri* means the strong, unselfish, active love. It is sharply distinguished in Buddhist tradition from *prema*, the Pāḷi *pema*, in the sense of sexual love or attachment. A *mitra* or friend in this sense therefore means one who feels a strong unselfish active love towards one.

But what does *kalyāṇa* mean? Firstly, *kalyāṇa* means beautiful, charming, and secondly it means auspicious, helpful, morally good. Thus, *kalyāṇa mitra* has a much richer connotation than the English spiritual friend.

So who are spiritual friends in the sense of *kalyāṇa mitra*? They are all those who are more spiritually experienced, even spiritually more advanced, very much more advanced than we are. The Buddhas of course are our spiritual friends, especially Shakyamuni Buddha, who discovered and taught the Dhamma in this aeon. The Arahants and the Bodhisattvas are our spiritual friends. The great Buddhist teachers of India and China, of Tibet and Japan are our spiritual friends. The figures on the Refuge Tree are our spiritual friends. Those who teach us meditation are our spiritual friends. Those with whom we study the scriptures are our spiritual friends. Those who ordain us are our spiritual friends and all these spiritual friends should be the objects of our intense, heartfelt gratitude. We should be even

more grateful to them than we are to our teachers. Why? It's because from our spiritual friends that we receive the Dhamma. We've not discovered the Dhamma, we've not invented the Dhamma, we have actually received it as a free gift. We've received it from our spiritual friends, from the Buddha downwards.

In the Dhammapada the Buddha says, **“The greatest of all gifts is the gift of the Dhamma.”**

And the greater the gift, the greater the gratitude that we should feel. We should not only feel that gratitude in our hearts, we should give expression to it in words and deeds. And how do we do this? We give expression to it in three ways. By singing the praises of our spiritual friends, by practising the Dhamma they have given us and by passing on that Dhamma to others to the best of our ability.

The greatest of our spiritual friends is of course the Buddha, the Buddha Shakyamuni or Gautama the Buddha, who discovered or re-discovered the path that we as Buddhists follow today. It's to him that we go for Refuge, it's the Dhamma taught by him that we try to practice, and it's with the support of the Community or Saṅgha founded by Him that we enjoy as we try to practice the Dhamma and we are therefore intensely grateful to Him; more grateful to Him in principle than to anyone else. Our parents have indeed given us life but what is life we may say without the gift of the Dhamma. Our teachers have given us knowledge, education and culture, our *kalyāṇa mitras* give us spiritual guidance, but what are these things without the Dhamma?

For 45 successive years, did the Buddha sleep less than two hours each night and preached the supreme Dhamma of the Tathāgathas for the welfare of gods and men. To further clarify

the profound panacea for the ills of saṃsāra The Compassionate One explained the Dhamma he re-discovered in 84,000 different aspects. He would traverse miles, on foot, if he could enable even one person who has the potential to escape the clutches of saṃsāra. So we should be intensely grateful to the Gauthama Buddha – indeed to all Buddhas. **That is why we worship the Buddha, that is why we perform the Sevenfold Pūja, and that is why we are celebrating Wesak, the celebration of the Buddha's Enlightenment.**

But people don't always find it easy to be grateful, don't find it easy to be grateful to parents or teachers, or even to their spiritual friends if they have them. Some people seem to find it very difficult, so why is this? What's the reason for the difficulty that they seem to experience? After all, gratitude is an important quality, an important spiritual quality, an important virtue. It's a quality that was praised and exemplified by the Buddha. The Buddha as we've seen was grateful to the Bodhi tree, to his former companions in asceticism, and not only that, gratitude featured in His teachings. It featured in the Maṅgala Sutta and elsewhere. So evidently, it's a very important ethical and spiritual quality.

Ingratitude therefore represents a very serious defect. So why are we ungrateful? Why are we ungrateful to our parents, ungrateful to our teachers, ungrateful to our spiritual friends? One would have thought that as Buddhists we would have been simply bubbling over with gratitude to all these people.

A clue perhaps is to be found in the Pāli word *kataññutā*, which we render as gratitude. *Kataññutā* means knowing or recognising what has been done. That is to say, what has been

done to one or for one's benefit. Similarly, *akataññutā*, *a-* being the negative prefix, or ingratitude means not knowing or recognising what has been done for one, or done to one in the positive sense, for one's benefit.

So why is this? There are many reasons but the four most important ones why ingratitude arises are:

1. Failure to recognise a benefit as a benefit
2. Taking benefits for granted
3. Egotism
4. Forgetfulness.

There are some people who do not regard life itself as a benefit. Hence, they don't feel grateful to their parents for bringing them into the world. Sometimes they say things like "Well, I didn't ask to be brought into this world".

If you believe in karma and rebirth this isn't quite true. Anyway, this is what people say and in a few cases they may not regard life as a benefit because they feel it is painful, even predominantly painful. They therefore, or more often we may say, don't regard it as a benefit because they don't appreciate its value. They don't realise the immense potential of human life. In Buddhist terms they don't realise that it is possible for a human being to attain enlightenment or at least to make some progress in that direction.

Similarly, there are people who don't regard knowledge or education or culture as benefits. So they do not feel grateful towards their teachers; towards those who at least tried to imbue secular education. They may even feel resentful. They may feel

that something called education or culture is being imposed upon them. Such people are unlikely to come into contact with spiritual values. They are unlikely to come into contact with the Dhamma and unlikely to come into contact with spiritual friends. Or even if they do come into contact with them such contact will be external and superficial. They will not be able to recognise them for what they are. They may even see their spiritual friends or those who try to be their spiritual friends as enemies, and therefore the question of gratitude will not arise.

We mustn't think, we mustn't be under the impression that all those people who heard the Buddha speak, or teach, felt grateful to Him. There were many people in the Buddha's day who didn't see the Buddha as the Buddha. They saw him as a rather eccentric, unorthodox teacher, and they certainly didn't feel any gratitude towards him for the gift of the Dhamma. Sometimes they slandered him. His own cousin Devadatta (not knowing that The Buddha cannot be assassinated) even tried to kill Him because, due to his (Devadatta's) vanity and haughtiness, wanted to become the leader of the Saṅgha.

Remember, The Buddha began preaching His hard-found Dhamma in an era of non-Buddhists to a society reeking not only with their self-importance of caste/creed due to birth but also were practically intoxicated with rites and rituals and the delusions associated with 62 different speculative views (see *Brahmajāla Sutta* in the *Dīgha Nikāya*).

Secondly, ingratitude arises when taking benefits for granted. In other words, although we recognise the benefit as a benefit, and even recognise the donor, yet we do not acknowledge

nor realise that those benefits are a free gift so to speak. We think that they are owed to us. We think that we have a right to them and we think therefore that they belong to us already, as it were. So, we've no need to be grateful; there's nothing to be grateful for.

This attitude is, of course, very widespread in society today. People tend to think that everything is due to them; think that they have a right to everything. Receiving handouts appears a way of life. This type of person feels that parents, teachers, friends and even the state have a duty to provide them with whatever they want. Even spiritual friends, they may think, have a duty to provide them with their needs. And if they don't get what they want from one spiritual friend, one teacher, one guru, one friend, and get it quickly, in the way that they want, well, off they go and try and get it from another. Once again, the question of gratitude doesn't arise.

And then we come to egotism. In what way is egotism a reason for ingratitude? Egotism has many forms, it has many different aspects. In this respect, it means an attitude of chronic blind individualism. The belief that one is separate from others, that one is not dependent on others in any way. That one does not owe anything to others. That one is not obliged to them. That one can do everything oneself.

Egotism in the sense also finds expression in the sphere of religion. It happens when we don't acknowledge the source or sources of our inspiration, or when we try to pass off as our own, a teaching of a practice that we have in fact learnt from our spiritual friends and/or read in books.

Let us now look to the fourth and last reason for general ingratitude and that is forgetfulness. There are two main reasons for this forgetfulness of ours. That is to say, our forgetfulness of benefits received.

First of all, of course, there's the passage of time. Perhaps the benefits were given to us a long, long time ago. So long ago in fact that we have no distinct recollection of them anymore, so that we no longer feel gratitude to the person or persons who bestowed those benefits upon us, even if we did originally feel grateful to them. This is perhaps the principal reason for our not expressing a feeling of gratitude towards our parents, at least not being actively grateful. Over the years, so much has happened in our life; early memories have been overlaid by later ones. Other relationships have assumed importance in our lives. Perhaps we've moved away from our parents, geographically or socially and culturally as well. Or, they may have deceased. So we tend to forget them. We forget the numerous ways in which they benefited us; when we were infants and needed round-the-clock attention, or when we were young and had to be guided, or how they looked after us when we were ill, and so on, and we cease therefore to actually feel grateful.

Secondly, we do not feel the positive effects of the benefits very strongly in the first place. So the original feeling of gratitude is not very strong, and it's easy, therefore for it to fade away and be forgotten altogether.

These then are the four most important general reasons for ingratitude. Failure to recognize a benefit as a benefit, taking benefits for granted, egotism, and forgetfulness. The reasons in that they play a part in varying degrees in all cases of ingratitude, whether in respect of parents, teachers or spiritual friends. In

respect of spiritual friends perhaps the most common cause of ingratitude is, simply, forgetfulness.

And now we come to the reasons for ingratitude in the spiritual life and therewith to the conclusion. When referring to ingratitude in connection with the spiritual life, the accent is on ingratitude on the part of those who go for refuge to the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha, whether provisionally or effectively. Those who go for refuge in the real sense, in the technical sense (laymen who join the Saṅgha with the avowed and sincere target of escaping the recurrent wheel of saṃsāra, and not those who don the robe for other reasons), of course, would be incapable of ingratitude. They will, in fact, be overflowing with gratitude, gratitude to parents, to teachers, to spiritual friends and so on.

So, let us be grateful, let us feel grateful. Let us know and recognize the benefits we have received. Let us be grateful to our parents with all their admitted imperfections of course. Parents are not perfect any more than children are. Let us be grateful to our teachers, to our spiritual friends and last but not least, to our Buddhist tradition.

Above all, let us be grateful to the Buddha. Let us remember the Buddha. Remember Him on this day and always. Let us remember in particular that the Buddha, whose attainment of enlightenment we are celebrating was a grateful Buddha.

Let us remember how, out of gratitude He spent the second week after the attainment of supreme, perfect enlightenment by paying homage to the Bodhi tree that sheltered him.

MAY ALL BEINGS CULTIVATE GRATITUDE AND BE HAPPY!

ENDNOTES

1. Aṅguttara-nikāya
2. Aṅguttara-nikāya
3. Aṅguttara-nikāya
4. Jātaka
5. Aṅguttara-nikāya
6. Aṅguttara-nikāya
7. Aṅkura-petavatthu
8. Jātaka
9. Aṅguttara-nikāya
10. Aṅguttara-nikāya
11. Aṅkura-petavatthu
12. Jātaka
13. Aṅguttara-nikāya
14. Aṅguttara-nikāya
15. Aṅguttara-nikāya
16. Jātaka
17. Jātaka
18. Jātaka

Gratitude

Gratitude
