The Bhikkhu Commons,
the new monks' utility building
at Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery,
U.S.A., dedicated on July 4, 2010.

Gratitude

Luang Por Liam Thitadhammo
(Pra Rajbhavanavikrom)

Ajahn Sumedho
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Foreword

On the auspicious occasion that Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery, California, U.S.A. is celebrating it's new monks' utility building, the Bhikkhu Commons, on July 4, 2010, the Dhammapuja Fund has respectfully sought and received kind permission from our 6 Ajahns to publish a collection of 6 articles on *Gratitude* for free distribution as gifts of Dhamma to mark this occasion.

Gratitude is considered a significant quality in people's lives in the Buddhist culture and a great source of inner peace and happiness. By publishing these insightful reflections on gratitude we aspire to foster right understanding regarding kataññu-katavedi and the cultivation of this important Dhamma for the benefits of our good friends around the world.

The organisers wish to anumodana and thank everyone who has helped with the preparation and printing of this book including the cover designer, the photographers, the translators, the sponsors, etc. May the results of their wholesome deeds be a contributing factor for their attainment of right mindfulness, right concentration and wisdom.

We would like to dedicate the merits accrued from the printing and reading of this book to our mothers, fathers and teachers who are the people most worthy of gratitude.

Pleon Petchkua
The Dhammapuja Fund

June, 2010

Acariyapuja Day January 16, at Nong Pah Pong Monastery, Ubon Rajathani, Thailand.

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The Right Angle*
It's never wrong.

By Venerable Luang Por Liam Thitadhammo
(Pra Rajbhavanavikrom)

The entire world and everyone in it needs the Dhamma as a protection. We all survive and find comfort in life with the support of the knowledge and skills, mindfulness and wisdom, of countless others. Without their help we would all perish as soon as we leave our mother's womb. We'd have no food to eat, clothes to wear or house to live in. Our parents, whose faces we have never even seen before, give us life and all the things we need to make us healthy and strong. For our clothes and living places, and all the various skills we learn, we are entirely indebted to others. From the first moments in our mothers womb, all of us have a debt of gratitude owed to innumerable other

* Offered to Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery, California, U.S.A. in May 2009, translated by Ajahn Siripañño.

people – no need to mention our parents and all our teachers, to whom the sense of gratitude we should feel is incalculable.

Even people of one nation have much to be grateful for to those living in another. This is something which, if you think about it, is not too hard to see. Knowing and acknowledging with gratitude the debt we have to others, and placing them above ourselves, is called *kataññuta*. The effort to repay the debt is called *katavedita*. The ones who know what has been done for them are called *kataññu*. And those who return the favor gratefully are called *katavedi*.

Kataññu-kataveditã: acknowledging the debt we owe to others and paying it back with acts of gratitude are spiritual qualities which protect the world from harm, help society to function, and lead to peace and happiness. People, however, are less and less able to see that we all have this mutual debt of gratitude which must be repaid, and failing to understand this is the reason for the increase in heated fighting and quarrelling. So, taking an interest in the qualities of kataññu-katavedi is something which is of vital importance to us all.

All the beautiful customs and traditions of old have in part been grounded in the principles of kataññu-katavedi. These qualities were firmly estab-

lished, nurtured over time and deeply understood by all societies. Anyone who fails to accept that our lives are inextricably linked with one another, and who does not see our mutual indebtedness, will surely live a life of selfish ingratitude.

The people who manifest most gratitude are the ones who acknowledge that even cows and buffaloes, and other animals, have helped us along the way, all the more so our parents and our teachers. If more people could develop gratitude to the cows and buffaloes of our world, then society would always be happy and peaceful on account of such a broad vision and lofty thoughts. Feeling grateful even to the animals, how could we harm our fellow human beings to whom we owe so much more?

Any society prospers and flourishes when its members cultivate spiritual qualities. Having fully developed the human potential, the capacity for profound thoughts, people will be diligent and skilled in earning their livelihood without intending even the slightest harm to one another. If we wish to so prosper, again, it goes without saying how much we have to be grateful for to our parents and teachers, since these are the true *devas* illuminating our lives, the *pujaniya-puggalã*: the people worthy to be held up, high above our own little heads and truly venerated.

Anyone who develops a more refined sense of gratitude in life will gradually feel a deep appreciation to the forests, fields, streams, rivers and swamps, the paths and roads and everything in the world, the flowers and the unknown birds flying here and there all around us. Not knowing the value of forests there are those who have destroyed them with their selfishness, so our children and grandchildren will have no wood for their houses. In addition the streams and marshes dry up because the forests, where the water reserves naturally gather, have all gone. Without the forests and the flowing streams, the clouds can no longer form and build up to release their abundant rains. Fruit trees are cut down whole, so their entire worth is reduced to what can be harvested that one time.

If people simply had gratitude in their hearts, then these things couldn't happen. The things which gladden the mind would be plentiful all over the earth and everywhere we would live at ease. Being grateful for all the things our planet provides us with, we would cherish, nurture and foster its welfare.

On a deeper and more subtle level still, we can also acknowledge even the debt we owe to our enemies, and feel grateful for life's obstacles. Viewed from this angle, such opponents help us to grow in

wisdom, patient endurance, and a spirit of sacrifice. People who are envious and jealous only serve to strengthen our own hearts and bring out the best of our *mettã* and *karunã*, which we might ordinarily lack.

All the difficulties we face allow us to see the world in its true nature. And through learning how to overcome life's challenges, we find the way to a life of ease. All our illnesses and problems can thus give rise to insight in us. We are forced to let go until we really see the truth of *anicca, dukkha* and *anattã* and eventually realize the path and fruit of Nibbana. People without kataññu do not know the value of these adversities, and they heap disaster and peril onto their lives while digging their own graves with anger and negativity. Their minds know no ease and their lack of self-control, with the frustration it brings, means that they are filled with fear and trembling as life seems to go ever more wrong. They are on a fixed course for self-destruction.

However, those who appreciate life's challenges, who gratefully rise up to meet them, bring an immeasurable coolness and beauty to the world. The most demonic of people, the world's *mãras*, they venerate as if they were virtuous monks. The *yakkha* types, those who are insatiably greedy or angry, they view as truly worthy human beings. They see the generous side of

stingy people and, even in others' jealousy, they manage to find a degree of warmth.

If all people felt this way, how could our world fail to become a heavenly realm?

We should all be grateful to our enemies, for they are the ones who give us life's highest teachings, lessons which are to be found nowhere else. We should therefore give thanks to them and honor such teachers with our own efforts to embody goodness, sharing the blessings of our life with them. There is so much to be grateful to our enemies for – people with *kataññu* are very aware of this. With no enemies or obstacles in life, the world would be empty of truly capable people.

Knowing the value of adversity, nothing in life is perceived as bothersome or difficult. With lofty thoughts such as these, as people develop this most subtle sense of gratitude, this very capacity to appreciate those who oppose us and those things which obstruct us, the heat from the frictions of the world becomes cool.

Considering this, how even our enemies have been of so much help to us, try then to imagine the value of our mothers and fathers, and the highest of all objects of veneration, the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha.

Not a single one of us was conceived in a hollow tree stump. We all arose in the little space of our mother's womb, with the help of our father too. Having been born into the wide world, we survived through to maturity thanks to the daily sacrifices of our parents and all the countless others who played a role in our lives. The Buddha and all wise people point to the role of our parents, honoring them as our primary caregivers who, having brought us forth, provided us with all the support we needed to flourish. They are the ones who equipped us with the skills for living, taught us how to be good and gave us many other things that have brought blessings into our lives.

Anyone who lacks integrity, who is incapable of feeling appreciation for his or her parents, will surely never know the debt they owe their enemies. Deeply absorbing one's parents' qualities is a clear sign of katañña, wherever in the world a person is from, and one who lacks gratitude to his or her parents will never fully be trusted.

Spiritual teachers undertake the task of training their disciples' minds, picking up from where their parents left off and taking them to yet even higher levels. For this purpose teachers have to develop extraordinary patient endurance, and painstakingly put their hearts into their work, if they are to plant and culti-

vate deeper and deeper levels of spiritual awareness in their disciples' minds. This is the sign of true mettã in a teacher – they must constantly study and train themselves to a very high level, thereby having the wherewithal to instill the truth in their disciples' hearts. This is the sign of true wisdom in a teacher.

Teachers must be constantly selfless and, in this way, remain the reliable objects of their disciples' deep veneration – not just spiritual workers to be hired and fired. Any disciples, having cultivated a wholesome mind and knowing what is proper, will feel much katañña towards their teachers, those who bring coolness to the world with their enduring patience and wisdom.

Acknowledging the debt we have to our parents and teachers simply makes one want to give in return; this is achieved by doing only that which will be of benefit to future generations. Disciples will do anything to honor the good name of their spiritual home and they constantly share the merits of their wholesome actions with their mother, father and teachers.

The Lord Buddha once said that when we reflect correctly on the qualities of someone who has died, then only one path lies open to us – that of developing goodness in ourselves. In the broadest sense this means to honor that person and share the bless-

ings of our life with them. So anyone who loves their mother, father or spiritual guide, and who knows the debt owed to them, should turn their hearts and minds to that which is beneficial for the world.

The Blessed One, the Buddha, is known as the supreme teacher for the ability he had to deepen people's awareness to a point where they no longer experienced any suffering at all, to a state of nobility, a realization of enlightenment.

The Dhamma taught by him is a pathway to improve the mind and go beyond the oceans of suffering. The Sangha, men and women whose lives are dedicated to following his teachings, have handed down these truths over the years until they have reached us here today.

This chance we have to receive these highest gifts is as wonderful as if the Blessed One himself were offering them directly to us. The Noble Disciples endured all manner of hardships in order to faithfully maintain the Buddha's dispensation, all of this having been done with a heart of deep devotion and gratitude to the Teacher.

We can be encouraged, then, that the teachings are nothing other than our true rightful inheritance, passed down through the kataññu of the Noble Ones of former times, who were determined to live their

lives in line with the Blessed One's intentions. This katañña of the enlightened disciples has allowed the Dhamma to span the millennia and, still to this day, the world can find respite in the cool refuge and under the shade of these teachings of awakening. All this is because of the constant hardships endured, and the sacrifices made, based on the spirit of katañña flowing strong in the hearts of the liberated ones.

The world is protected by the Dhamma because from the time of the Buddha onwards members of the assembly of his disciples have not wandered away from his instructions, their lives always following his guidelines, thus they have honored and kept alive his spiritual qualities. Gratitude is what protects the world and, in turn, is something that we should all protect.

In truth, all good Buddhist traditions and customs have arisen based on the principle of katañña-katavedi. They were born out of gratitude and were designed to further instill this sense deeply into the hearts of the next generation. All our various rites and rituals, starting with the cremation of our parents and teachers, should be grounded in a spirit of katañña-katavedi; this needs to be firmly established in everyone's mind more than any other thought. So we carry out these ceremonies with true dedication – with no sense that there might be too much fuss and bother

or that the expenses are in anyway wasted – because we see how important it is for our lives to be suffused with a feeling of kataññu-katavedi and how, in turn, this makes the world a cool and pleasant place.

The traditions and religions of every nation, of every tongue, all have these principles at heart and in our Buddhist teachings we must take great care that, however we repay our debt of gratitude, our efforts are not wasted but are genuinely beneficial for society. In this way the feelings of gratitude which should be felt by all Buddhists bring cool shade to the world and lift up peoples' hearts.

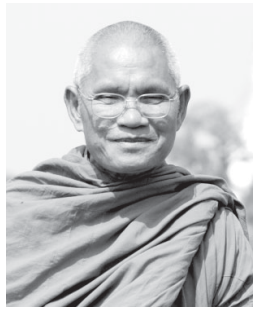
If all of us could realize this highest truth – the fact that each of us human beings has a debt of gratitude to everyone without exception, even, again, those who perceive each other as mutual enemies – then people would vie with one another to carry out acts of goodness and virtue in order to fully pay off the debts we owe.

If the hearts of everyone on earth were truly filled with kataññu-katavedi, then doubtless our world would be more beautiful and alluring than a heavenly realm, safer and more praiseworthy than a heavenly realm, more desirable than any heavenly realm. If we consider this well, we will be able to maintain restraint towards one another, not acting impulsively or out of

anger. When we think of people who have helped us in the past, parents, siblings, aunts and uncles, then we won't act in mean or selfish ways. And even if we do at times, unthinkingly, we will be quick to ask for and to give forgiveness. Thinking of parents and teachers who have passed away brings up thoughts of respect in us, and so we care for, and behave compassionately towards, our fellow human beings.

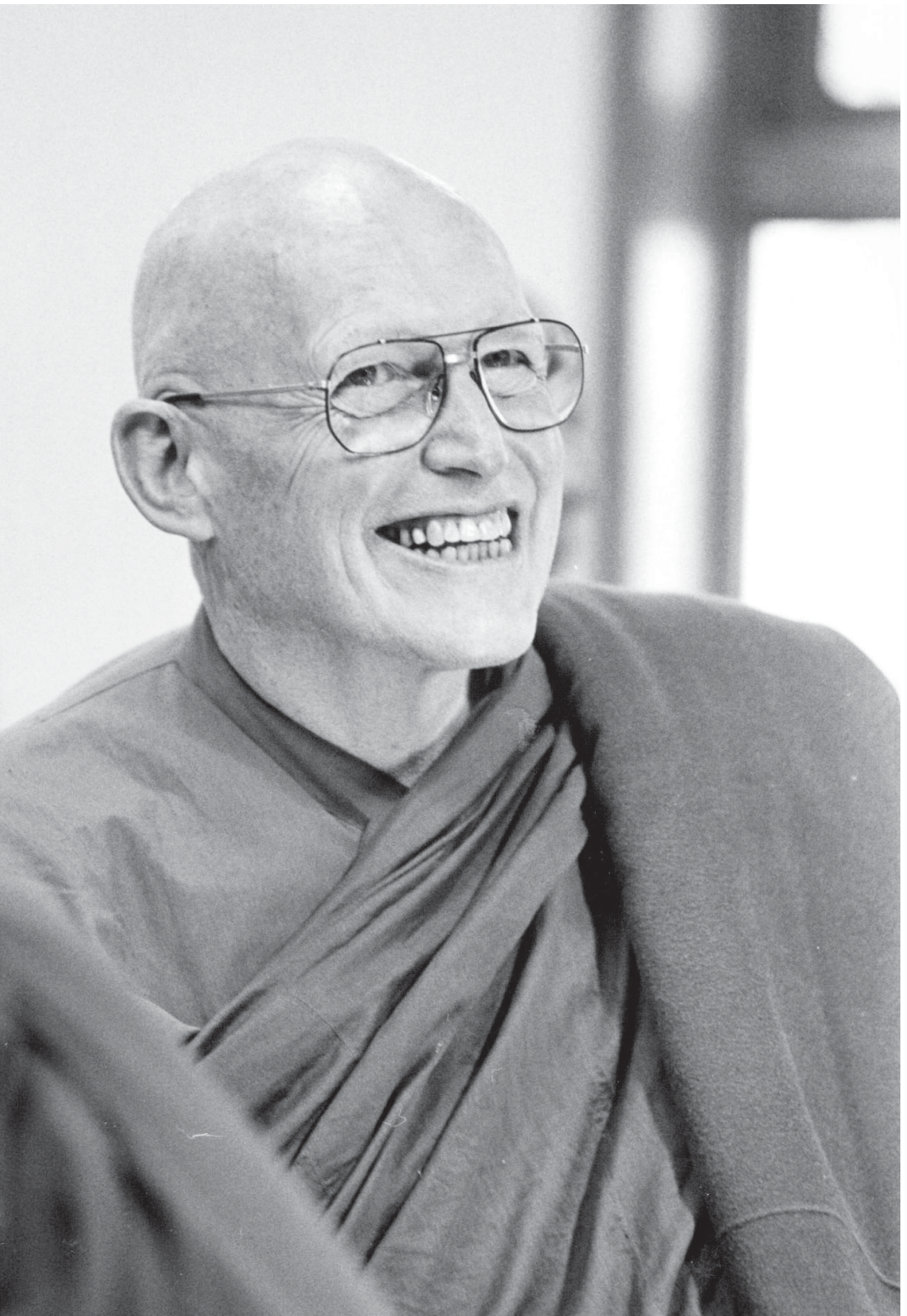
Kataññu, the spirit of gratitude, has the power to change a yakkha into a true human being. The spirit of gratitude will benefit the world so much, and keep it cool forever.

Thus we should cherish this highest of qualities, striving and sacrificing to keep it alive in our hearts, as the safest shelter for us all.



Venerable Luang Por Liam Thitadhammo (Pra Rajbhavanavikrom)

Born	5 November 1941, Srisaket Province, Thailand.
1960	Ordained as samanera (novice monk) at Ban Kok Jan Monastery, Srisaket Province, Thailand.
1961	Received full Bhikkhu ordinatiion, with Pra Kru Thavornchaiket as preceptor.
1969	Studied and trained under the Venerable Ajahn Chah of Nong Pah Pong Monastery, Ubon Rajathani Province, Thailand
1973	Travelled to a branch of Nong Pah Pong Monastery in Vientiane, Lao People's Democratic Republic. Disseminated the teachings during one Rains Retreat then returned to Thailand due to political unrest there.
1994 - present	Abbot, Nong Pah Pong Monastery.
1996	Received preceptor appointment.
2001	Received Royal appointment as Pra Visudhisangvornthera.
2006	Received Royal appointment as Pra Rajbhavanavikrom.



Gratitude to Parents*

By Venerable Ajahn Sumedho
(Pra Rajsumedhajahn)

Amaravati again – a special day, an auspicious day. This morning many of you were here for the traditional offering and special dedication for our parents – those who have passed away as well as those who are living. On this day we are considering kataññu-katavedi, which is the Pali for gratitude. Gratitude is a positive response to life; in developing kataññu we deliberately bring into our consciousness the good things done to us in our life. So on this day, especially, we remember the goodness of our parents, and we contemplate it. We are not dwelling on what they did wrong; instead, we deliberately choose to remember the goodness. And the kindness that our parents had for us – even though in some cases, generos-

* Edited from a talk given at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, England in October 1994.

ity might not have been there at all times. This is one day in the year for remembering our parents with gratitude and recalling all the good things they have done for us.

A life without kataññu is a joyless life. If we don't have anything to be grateful about, our life is a dreary plane. Just contemplate this. If life was just a continuous complaint and moan about the injustices and unfairness we have received and we don't remember anything good ever done to us, and all we do is remember the bad things – that's called depression, and this is not an uncommon problem now. When we fall into depression we cannot remember any good that has happened to us. Something stops in the brain and it is impossible to imagine ever being happy again; we think this misery is forever.

In Sri Lanka, and throughout Asia, kataññu-katavedi is a cultural virtue; it is highly regarded and cultivated. Being able to support and look after our parents is considered to be one of the great blessings of a life. This is interesting for those of us who come from a Western cultural background, because Western values are slightly different from this.

Many of us have had fortunate lives, but although we have been born in fortunate places we can tend to take a lot for granted. We have privileges and

benefits, and a much better life than a good portion of people in the world can ever hope to expect. There's a lot to be grateful for, a lot to feel kataññu for, when you live in a place like Britain.

I think back to when I was a child, and the way my parents devoted their lives to look after me and my sister. When I was young, I didn't appreciate it at all. As a child in the States, we didn't think about it, we took our mother and father for granted. And we could not realise what they had to sacrifice, what they had to give up in order to take care of us. It's only when we are older and have given up things for the sake of our own children or somebody else that we begin to appreciate and feel kataññu-katavedi for our parents.

I think back to my father. He was an aspiring artist before the Depression in 1929. Then in '29 the Crash came and he and my mother lost everything, so he had to take a job selling shoes. My sister and I were born during the Depression, and he had to support us. Then the 2nd World War started, but my father was too old to enlist in the military; he wanted to support the war effort, so he became a ship fitter in New Seattle. He worked in a shipyard. He didn't like that job, but it was the best way he could help in the 2nd World War. Then, after the war he went back to his shoe business and became a manager of a retail store.

Talking to him when I grew up, I found that he had never really liked that work either, but he felt he was too old to find another profession. The sacrifice of his own preferences was mainly to support my mother, my sister and myself.

I had a much bigger choice, much better opportunities. My generation had a whole wide range of possibilities available to us when we were young. However my parents did not have such opportunities; their generation had to get on with their lives and start work when they were still quite young. Both my parents were capable but they did not have the opportunity to develop beyond the ordinary way of making a living.

When I was at university in the 1950s, it was fashionable to study psychology. At that time the trend was to blame your mother for everything that went wrong in your life. The focus was on mothers and what they had done to cause ME to suffer now. I didn't realise then that suffering was a natural thing for human beings. Of course my mother was not perfect, she was not a perfectly enlightened being when she had me, so naturally there were things she could have improved on. But generally speaking, the dedication, commitment, love, and care were all there – and directed mainly to making the lives of my father, my

sister and myself as good and as happy as could be. It was a dedication; she asked very little for herself. So when I think back like this, kataññu, gratitude, arises in my mind for my mother and father. Now I can hardly think of any of their faults which used to dominate my mind when I was young; they seem so trivial now, I hardly recall any.

However, if we just go on with the force of habit and conditioning we remain more or less stuck with all kinds of things instilled into us – with habits that we acquired when we were young – and these can dominate our conscious life as we get older. But as we mature and grow up, we realise that we can develop skilfulness in the way we think about ourselves, and in the way we think about others. The Buddha encouraged us to think of the good things done for us by our parents, by our teachers, friends, whoever; and to do this intentionally – to cultivate it, to bring it into consciousness quite deliberately – rather than just letting it happen accidentally.

When I became a Buddhist monk in Thailand I was very fortunate to meet a teacher, Luang Por Chah, who became the catalyst for the kataññu in my life. At that time I was 33 or 34 years old and I must say, kataññu was not yet part of my life's experience. I was still very much obsessed with myself, what I wanted,

what I thought. However after training as a Buddhist monk for some years, in about the sixth year of monastic life I had a heart-opening experience which was very much the experience of kataññu-katavedi.

I had been a Buddhist for many years before I met Luang Por Chah. I was attracted to Buddhism about the age of 21, and so I had tremendous interest and faith in Buddhism, as well as an eagerness to study and practise it. But it was still coming from the sense of me doing it, me studying it, me trying to practise it. When I became a monk there was still this dominant interest in my mind: "I want to get rid of suffering, I want to be enlightened." I was not much concerned about other people, about my parents, or even about Luang Por Chah with whom I was living at the time. It was very nice that he was helpful to me (and "thank you"), but it was not a deep gratitude.

There was a conceit, an unpleasant kind of conceit: I had the idea that life owed all this to me. When we are brought up in my kind of middle-class situation, we take so much for granted. My parents worked hard to make my life comfortable, but I thought they should have worked harder, I deserved more than what they gave me. Even though this was not a conscious thought, there was the underlying attitude that I deserved all I had; it was right to get all

this, people should give me these things, my parents should make my life as good as possible, as I wanted it to be. So from that viewpoint, it was Ajahn Chah's duty to teach and guide me!

Sometimes I had the conceit that my presence was a great blessing and asset to the monastery. It was not all that conscious, but when I began to contemplate things in my mind I could see this conceit, and became aware of this insensitivity. We can take so much for granted and complain that life is not as good, as abundant, as privileged as we could imagine it; or else we think that others are much better off than ourselves.

In Thailand, I practised with diligence and was determined in my monastic life. After five vassas[1] a monk is no longer considered to be a novice and can get away on his own. I felt that being with a teacher was fine but I wanted to go away on my own, so I went away to Central Thailand from North-East Thailand. Then after the vassa I went on a pilgrimage to India. This was in about 1974, and I decided to go as a tudong[2] bhikkhu – that is to walk form place to place

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[1] **Vassã:** Buddhist Lent, Rains, the monsoon-season retreat period. A bhikkhu's seniority is determined by the number of 'Rains' he has spent in the Order.

[2] **Dhutanga:**(Thai: tudong) special strict monastic observances. Dhutanga bhikkhus are noted for their diligence and impeccability. In Thailand, such monks often undertake the mendicant's wandering practice of the Buddha's time - hence the phrase, 'to wander (or 'go') tudong'.

as part of my practice as a monk. Somebody provided me with a ticket from Bangkok to Calcutta, and I found myself in Calcutta with my alms bowl, my robe and – because I do not carry money – no pennies. In Thailand it had been easy but, in India, it seemed that wandering around with an alms bowl and no money would be quite frightening. As it happened, the five months I spent in India were quite an adventure and I have very pleasant memories of that time. The life of an alms mendicant worked in India. Of all countries, it should work there, as that's where the Buddha lived and taught.

It was about this time that I began to think of Luang Por Chah. My mind began to recognise the kindness he had extended to me. He had accepted me as his disciple, looked after me, taken an interest, given me the teachings and helped me in almost every way. And there was his own example. If you wanted to be a monk, you wanted to be like him. He was a full human being, a man who inspired me, someone I wanted to emulate – and I must say there weren't so many men that I had had that feeling towards. In the States, the role models for men were not very attractive to me; John Wayne or President Eisenhower or Richard Nixon were not men I wanted to emulate. Film stars and athletes were given great importance,

but none of them inspired me.

But then in Thailand, I found this monk. He was very small; I towered above him. When we were together sometimes that surprised me, because he had such an enormous presence. Despite his size he seemed always much bigger than I was. It was interesting, the power, the aura of this little man – I didn't really think of him as a little man, I thought of him as a huge man, and this was because of the metta (kindness) in his life. He was a man of enormous metta. There was this feeling about him that attracted people to him, he was like a magnet and you wanted to be close to him. So I found myself going over to see him in his kuti in the evenings, or whenever it was possible; I wanted to take every opportunity I had to hang around. And I found that that was the way most people tended to behave towards him. He had an enormous following in Thailand, both Thai and Westerners, because of his metta practice. I asked him once what it was in him that drew people to him and he said, "I call it my magnet." He was a very charming person; he had an ebullience, a radiant quality, so people flocked around. And he used his magnet to attract people so that he could teach them the Dhamma. This is how he used the charismatic quality he had: not for his ego, but to help people.

I felt a great sense of gratitude that he should do this – that he would spend his life taking on lay people and difficult monks like myself, having to put up with all of us endlessly creating problems; we were so obsessed with ourselves, with our desires, our doubts, our opinions, our views. To be surrounded day and night by people who are endlessly irritating takes real metta, and he would do it. He could have just gone off to a nice place and led a quiet life. That's what I wanted to do at the time. I wanted to get enlightened so that I could just live a nice peaceful life in a happy way in a pleasant peaceful place. I wanted everyone in the monastery to be harmonious, to have the right chemistry, and to harmonise with me so there would be no conflict or friction. But in a Thai monastery there are always a lot of problems and difficulties. The Vinaya Pitaka (the Books of the Discipline that the Lord Buddha established for the bhikkhus) has all the background stories of what the monks used to do that caused the Buddha to establish these disciplinary guidelines. Some of the rules deal with horrible things that the monks would do. Some of those bhikkhus around the Lord Buddha were abominable.

The Lord Buddha, after his enlightenment, at first thought that the Dhamma was too subtle, that no one would understand it so there was no point in

teaching it. Then, according to the legend, one of the gods came forth and said, "Please Lord, for the welfare of those who have little dust in their eyes, teach the Dhamma." The Buddha then contemplated with his powerful mind who might understand the Dhamma teaching. He remembered his early teachers but through his powers realised that both of them had died. Then he remembered his five friends who had been practising with him before, and who had deserted him. Out of compassion he went off to find these five friends, and expounded his brilliant teaching on the Four Noble Truths. So this made me feel kataññu-katavedi to the Lord Buddha. It's marvellous: here I am – this guy, here, in this century – having an opportunity to listen to the Dhamma, and to have this pure teaching still available.

Also, having a living teacher like Ajahn Chah was not like worshipping a prophet who lived 2500 years ago, but actually inheriting the lineage of the Lord Buddha himself. Perhaps because of visiting the Buddhist holy places, kataññu-katavedi began to become very strong in me in India. Seeing this, and then thinking of Luang Por Chah in Thailand, I remembered how I had thought: "I've done my five years, now I'm going to leave. I'm going to have a few adventures, do what I want to do, be out from under the

eye of the old man." I realised then that I had actually run away. At that time there were many Westerners coming to our monastery in Thailand, and I did not want to be bothered with them. I did not want to have to teach them and translate for them, I just wanted to have my own life and not be pestered by these people. So there was a very selfish motivation in me to leave; on top of which I had left Luang Por Chah with all these Westerners who didn't speak Thai. At that time, I was the only one who could translate for the Westerners as Luang Por Chah could not speak English.

When I felt this kataññu-katavedi, all I wanted to do was get back to Thailand and offer myself to Ajahn Chah. How can you repay a teacher like that?... I did not have any money, and that was not what he was interested in anyway. Then I thought that the only way I could make him happy was to be a good Buddhist monk and to go back and help him out; whatever he wanted me to do, I would do it. With that intention, I went back after five months in India and gave myself to the teacher. It was a joyful offering, not a begrudging one, because it came out of this kataññu, this gratitude for the good things I had received.

From that time on, I found that my meditation practice began to improve. That hard selfishness cracked in me: me trying to get something, my desire

for harmony, me and my desire to practise and to have a peaceful life, me not wanting to be responsible for anything but just to do my own thing. When I gave up all that, things seemed to fall into place. What used to be difficult, like concentrating the mind, became easier, and I found that life became joyful to me. I began to enjoy monastic life. I wasn't just sitting around thinking, "You are disturbing my peace, I don't like this monastery – I want to go to another one," as I used to do. Nor did I feel as resentful as I had before: "This monk is disturbing my practice, I can't live here," and so on. This grumbling used to be an obstruction to my practice, but now suddenly these things, and the things that happened in the monastery were no longer important issues.

In fact I had thought that when I went back, I would ask Ajahn Chah to send me to a monastery to which no monk wanted to go, like a certain branch monastery on the Cambodian border. It was called Wat Bahn Suan Kluey, "The Banana Garden Village Monastery." It was in the backwoods, it had no good roads, and it was in a very undeveloped part of Thailand where the people were very poor. It was very hot there and all the trees were shorter than myself, although I didn't see very many bananas around! It would have been like being exiled to Siberia. So when

I returned, I suggested to Ajahn Chah that he send me there.

He didn't; but he did encourage me to go to Bahn Bung Wai, which was a village about 6 kilometres from the main monastery. So then in 1975 we established Wat Pah Nanachat, "The International Forest Monastery" near this village. Before we went there, the place had been a charnel ground, a cremation area for the village, and it was believed that the forest was filled with ghosts. So the villagers would come and ask, "Is it all right?" At first we didn't realise what the place meant to the villagers. Then I became aware that I was staying at the spot where the most fiendish ghost in the forest was supposed to live, so the village headman used to come and ask, "You sleep all right? Seen anything interesting?" I didn't see anything at all, the ghosts didn't bother me. But that experience actually helped me to prove my life as a monk, and that was due to kataññu.

So, too, was coming here to England in 1977. When Luang Por Chah asked me to come here I was determined to stick it out, not just to follow my own particular feelings and moods – because that first year I felt pretty awful, and I was ready to go back to Thailand. But because of this sense of gratitude, I wasn't going to follow a personal whim, it gave me a tremen-

dous sense of duty, of service, but not in a heavy way. Katañña meant that I did not stay here out of a sense of duty – which makes life unpleasant – but out of a willingness to sacrifice and to serve. This is a joyful thing to do. So we can feel katañña for our teachers like Luang Por Chah.

This reminds me of an interesting story. The monk who took me to see Luang Por Chah was the same age as I was; he had been in the Thai Navy, and I had been in the American Navy during the Korean War. He could speak Pidgin English, and had been on tudong – wandering from Ubon province, where Ajahn Chah lived, to Nong Khai where I was. It was my first year as a novice monk and he was the first Thai monk I had met who could speak English, so I was delighted to have somebody to talk to. He was also a very strict monk, adhering to every rule in the Vinaya. He would eat from his alms bowl and wore dark brown forest robes, whereas in the monastery where I lived, the monks wore orange-coloured robes; he really impressed me as an exemplary monk. He told me that I should go and stay with Ajahn Chah. So after I received bhikkhu ordination, my preceptor agreed that I could go with this monk to stay with Luang Por Chah. But on the way I began to get fed up with this monk – who turned out to be a pain in the neck. He

was forever fussing about things and condemning the other monks, saying that we were the very best. I could not take this incredible arrogance and conceit, and I hoped that Ajahn Chah would not be like him. I wondered what I was getting myself into.

When we arrived at Wat Pah Pong, I was relieved to find that Ajahn Chah was not like that. The following year the monk, whose name was Sommai, disrobed and he became an alcoholic. The only thing that had kept him off alcohol had been the monastic life, so then he fell into alcoholism and became a really degenerate man with a terrible reputation in the province of Ubon. He became a tramp, a really pathetic case, and I felt a sense of disgust and aversion towards him. Talking to Ajahn Chah one evening about it, he told me: "You must always have kataññu towards Sommai, because he brought you here. No matter how badly he behaves or degenerate he becomes, you must always treat him like a wise teacher and express your gratitude. You are probably one of the really good things that has happened to him in his life, something he can be proud of; if you keep reminding him of this – in a good way, not in an intimidating way – then eventually he might want to change his ways." So Luang Por Chah encouraged me to seek out Sommai, talk to him in a friendly way and express

my gratitude to him for taking me to Ajahn Chah. It really was a beautiful thing to do. It would have been easy to look down on him and say, "You really disappoint me. You used to be so critical of others and think you were such a good monk, and look at you now." We can feel indignant and disappointed at somebody for not living up to our expectations. But what Luang Por Chah was saying was: "Don't be like that, it's a waste of time and harmful, but do what's really beautiful out of compassion." I saw Sommai in the early part of this year, degenerate as ever; I could not see any change in him. Yet whenever he sees me, it seems to have a good effect on him. He remembers that he was the one responsible for me coming to stay with Luang Por Chah – and that's a source of a few happy moments in his life. One feels quite glad to offer a few happy moments to a very unhappy person.

Similarly, I think of teachers I did not know personally, like, for example, Alan Watts, whose book, *The Way of Zen,* was one of the books on Buddhism I had read earlier on. It impressed me greatly. To have anything to read on Buddhism in those days was a real treat, and I used to read that book over and over again. But later, I learnt that he had become degenerate. I did see him, when I attended some of his lectures in San Francisco but, although he was a good speaker, by then

I was in my critical phase, and he wasn't good enough for me.

So now I look back, and feel kataññu for people like Alan Watts, writers and teachers who have been responsible for encouraging me and helping me when I needed it. What they have done since then, or whether they have lived up to my expectations is not the point. Having metta and kataññu is about not being critical, or vindictive, or dwelling on the bad things people have done; it is the ability to select and remember the good they have done.

Having a day like this, when we deliberately think of parents with gratitude, is a way of bringing joy and positive feelings into our lives. This morning, taking the Five Precepts and offering the food to the Sangha as a way of remembering our parents with gratitude was a beautiful gesture. At a time like this, we should also consider expressing kataññu to the country we live in, because usually we take this for granted. But we can remember the benefits, the good things made available to us by the state and society, rather than just emphasizing what's wrong or what we do not like. Kataññu allows us to bring into consciousness all the positive things concerned with living in Britain. We should develop kataññu, even though modern thinking does not encourage us to do so. This

is not blind patriotism or national arrogance, but an appreciation and expression of gratitude for the opportunities and the good we derive from living in this society. This way of thinking then adds a joyous quality to life instead of thinking that this nation and society owe us everything: "I deserve more than this. They didn't do enough for me." That way of thinking comes from a welfare mind, doesn't it? Although grateful to the Welfare State, we also recognise that it can breed complaining minds, minds that take things for granted.

I first noticed this when I was in the American Navy in a supply ship that went to military bases between Japan and the Philippines. I liked sea duty, being out at sea, and so I quite enjoyed that part of it. I was also very fascinated by Asia and I had a chance to go to Japan, Hong Kong and the Philippines. I remember the first time going to Hong Kong in 1955, sailing into the harbour and being very excited about visiting the city. I tried to get someone to go with me but all he could say was, "Uh, I don't like Hong Kong." Here was I so enthusiastic, and I could not find anyone to come with me. The only ones who went out went to the brothels and to the bars – that's all they saw in Hong Kong. Now isn't this a negative mind state? The American military in those days was not very bright. If it wasn't like Des Moines, Iowa, it

wasn't any good. They did not see beauty in exotic places; they just saw that it wasn't like Des Moines, Iowa, or Birmingham, Alabama.

I spent four years in the Navy, and during that time there was this incessant complaining. Griping, they called it – and they used other words as well, which I won't use! We griped about everything. Actually, we had all kinds of advantages in those days in the military – like educational opportunities. I had four years of university scholarships through having been in the military, as well as many other things that I am quite grateful for now. And yet the attitude was to try to get as much as possible out of the system, to use it for one's own benefit; complain about everything and see what one could get away with. Even if what one was doing was immoral, illegal, that was OK – as long as you did not get caught. And this was in a society where everything was provided for you! Life was very secure, but the attitude was: "Give me, give me, give me. What can I get out of this?" The result was that it became a very negative society, with everybody griping and complaining endlessly.

So today is a day to develop katañña. Do not think it is just a day to be sentimental. Katañña is a practice to develop in our daily life, because it opens the heart and brings joy to our human experience. And

we need that joy, it's something that nurtures us and it is essential for our spiritual development. Joy is one of the factors of enlightenment. Life without joy is a dreary one – grey, dull, and depressing. So today is a day for joyous recollections.

Question: How do people who have a lot of anger towards their parents develop gratitude towards them?

Ajahn Sumedho: This is not an uncommon problem, because I know that teaching metta on too sentimental a basis can actually increase anger. I remember a woman on one of our retreats who, whenever it came to spreading metta to her parents, would go into a rage. Then she felt very guilty about it, as she was not able to forgive and develop loving-kindness to her mother. Every time she thought about her mother, she only felt this rage. This was because she only used her intellect; she wanted to do this practice of metta, but emotionally felt anything but that.

It's important to see this conflict between the intellect and the emotional life. We know in our mind that we should be able to forgive our enemies and love our parents, but in the heart we feel, "I can never forgive them for what they've done." So then we either feel anger and resentment, or we go into rationalisa-

tions: "Because my parents were so bad, so unloving, so unkind, they made me suffer so much that I can't forgive or forget," or: "There's something wrong with me, I'm a terrible person because I can't forgive. If I were a good person I would be able to forgive, therefore I must be a bad person." These are the conflicts that we have between the intellect and the emotions. When we don't understand this conflict, we are confused; we know how we should feel but we don't actually feel that way.

With the intellect we can figure it out ideally; we can create marvellous images and perceptions in the mind. But the emotional nature is not rational. It's a feeling nature, it is not going to go along with what is reasonable, logical, sensible – so on the emotional level we have to understand how we actually feel. I've found it helped to have metta for my own feeling. So when we feel that our parents were unkind and unloving to us we can have metta towards the feeling we have in the heart; not being judgmental, but having patience with that feeling – to see that this is how it feels, and then to accept that feeling. Then it is possible to resolve that feeling. But when we get stuck in a battle between our logical perceptions and our emotional responses, it gets very confusing.

Once I began to accept my negativity rather

than suppress it, I could resolve it. When we resolve something with mindfulness, then we can let it go and free ourself from the power of that particular thing – not through denial or rejection, but through understanding and accepting that particular negative feeling. The resolution of such a conflict leads us to contemplate what life is about.

My father died about six years ago. He was then 90 years old, and he had never shown love or positive feelings towards me. So from early childhood I had this feeling that he did not like me. I carried this feeling through most of my life; I never had any kind of love, any kind of warm relationship with my father. It was always a perfunctory: "Hello son, good to see you." And he seemed to feel threatened by me. I remember whenever I came home as a Buddhist monk he would say, "Remember, this is my house, you've got to do as I say." This was his greeting – and I was almost 50 years old at the time! I don't know what he thought I was going to do!

In the last decade of his life, he was quite miserable and became very resentful. He had terrible arthritis and was in constant pain, and he had Parkinson's disease and everything was going wrong. Eventually he had to be put in a nursing home. He was completely paralysed. He could move his eyes and

talk, but the rest of his body was rigid, totally still. He hated this. He was resentful of what had happened to him because before he had been a strong, independent, virile man. He had been able to control and manage everything in his life. So he hated and resented having to depend on nurses to feed him and so on.

My first year here I remember discussing my parents with my sister. She pointed out to me that my father was a very considerate man. He was very considerate and thoughtful towards my mother. He was always eager to help her when she was tired or unwell – a very supportive husband. Because I came from a family where it was normal for a man to be like that, I had never recognised those qualities. My sister pointed out that it is not often that a husband is supportive or helpful to his wife. For my father's generation, women's rights and feminism were not the issue. "I bring in the money, and you do the cooking and washing," was the attitude then. I realise then that I had not only completely overlooked these good qualities, I had not even noticed them.

The last time I went to see him, I decided that I would try to get some kind of warmth going between us before he died. It was quite difficult to even think this, because I had gone through life feeling that he didn't like me. It is very hard to break through that

kind of thing. Anyway, his body needed to be stimulated, so I said, "Let me massage your leg." And he said, "No, no, you don't need to do that." And I said, "You'll get bedsores, because you really have to have your skin massaged." And he still said, "No, you don't have to do it." Then I said, "I would really like to do it." And he said, "You don't have to do it." But I could tell that he was considering it. Then I said, "I think it'll be a good thing and I'd really like to do it," and he said, "So you'd really like to do it?" and I said, "Yes."

I started massaging his feet, his legs, his neck and shoulders, his hands and his face, and he really enjoyed the physical contact. It was the first time he had been touched like that. I think elderly people really like being touched, because physical contact is quite meaningful, it's an expression of feeling. And I began to realise that my father really loved me, but didn't know how to say it because of his upbringing. He'd been brought up in an Edwardian time in a very formal environment. His had been a "don't touch, don't get emotional" sort of a family. They had no great emotional explosions; feelings were always controlled. Now I realised that my father was quite a loving sort of man, but he could not express his feelings because of his background. And I had this great sense of relief. I couldn't understand him when I was young,

because I did not understand his upbringing and what he had been through. It was only when I grew older that I began to understand the consequences of having such an upbringing; once you are conditioned in that way, it is difficult to break out of it. I could see when I looked back that behind the behaviour of my father there was love, but it always came out in a commanding or demanding way, because that is the only way he knew how to talk. Like the way he said, "Remember, this is my house, and you have to do what I say." If I was going to be offended by that, I would have had a miserable time. But I decided not to pay any attention to that statement and not make a problem of it. I saw him as an old man losing his control, and maybe he saw me as a threat. He probably thought, "He's going to think I am a hopeless old man, but I'm going to show him."

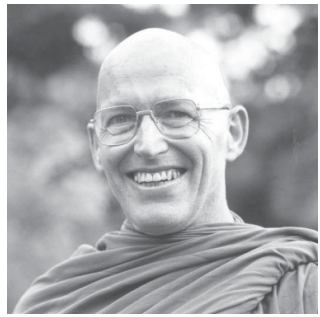
Those who have taken care of paraplegics or quadriplegics know that sometimes they get very cantankerous. We can think we are doing them a favour, but they can be quite demanding because when people are helpless like that they become very sensitive to the patronising way of healthy people towards the sick: "Let me help you – you're an invalid." This type of thing is also seen when young people care for the elderly.

Eight years ago, we had a man who wanted to come and die in the monastery. He was 80 years old, an Englishman who had been a Buddhist since 1937. He was a very nice man, and he had terminal cancer. So he stayed here at Amaravati and people from a Buddhist group in Harlow that he had founded and inspired would come to look after him. Sometimes when they couldn't come the monks would look after him. I had noticed that some of the monks were getting patronising about him. But this man would not take any of it: "I might be dying and all, but I'm not stupid," he'd say, and he made it very clear that he was not going to put up with such behaviour. So we have to be aware when we look after the elderly or the sick; we have to watch our reactions.

When we look at life from a historical point of view we see that it has always been difficult for people. When you visit a graveyard and read the gravestones here in England, you can find many of them are for young women – 25 years old or so – who died in childbirth, or for babies. That was very common in England just 100 years ago. Women could not necessarily expect to survive childbirth. Now, when someone dies in childbirth we are surprised and upset by it. We think life should not be like this, life should be fair. Our expectations are very high, and we can be very

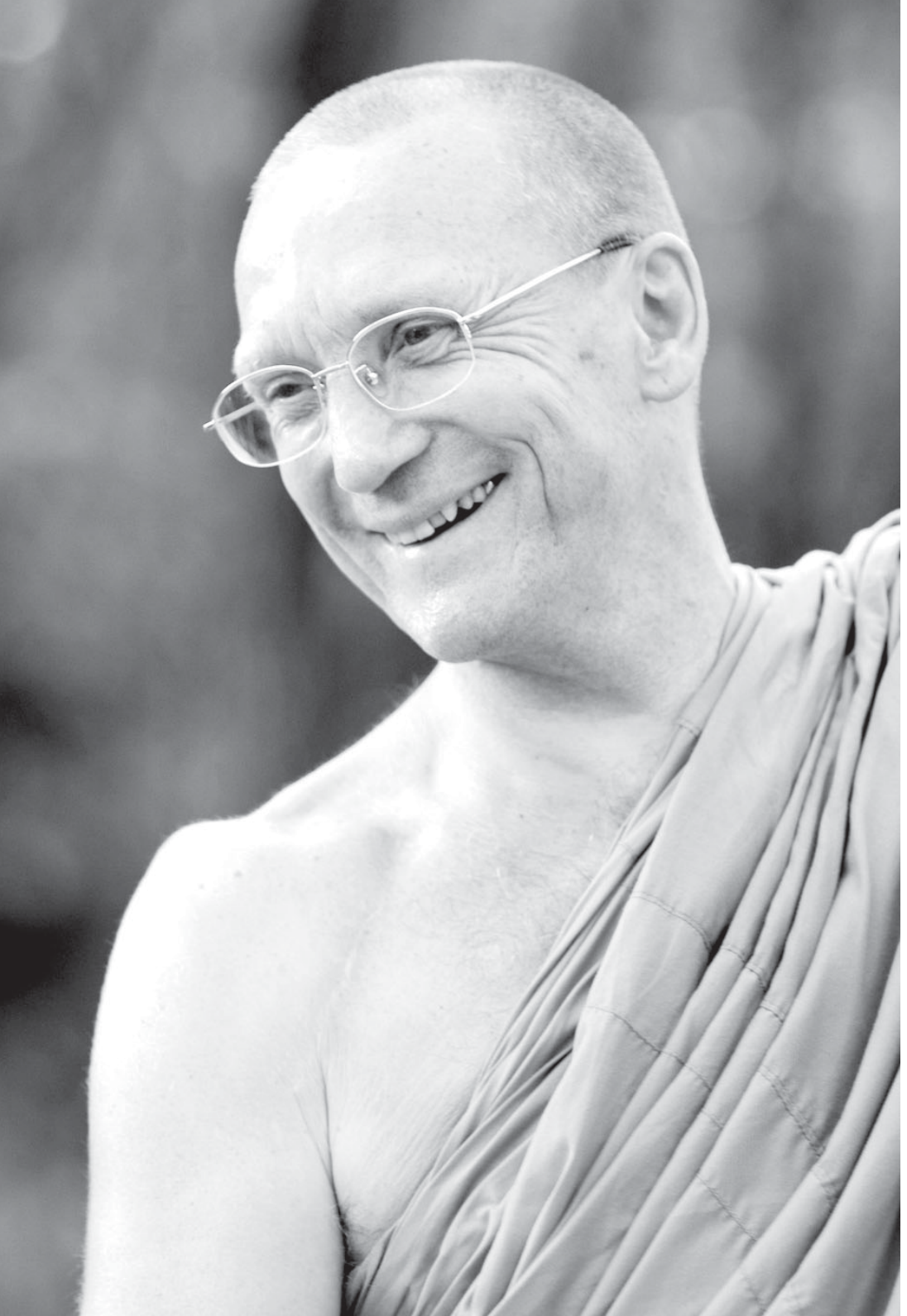
critical because we think that life should only get better and better. Yet even if we have everything, we can still live a joyless life. So it's how we relate to life, and how we develop our minds that counts – it's nothing to do with wealth and status, or even good health.

Life is a difficult experience, and it is an ongoing one. You keep learning until you die. Life is difficult but you keep thinking it should not be so, that it should be easy. Now, I think that life should be difficult, because that's the way we learn.



Venerable Ajahn Sumedho
(Pra Rajsumedhajahn)
Former Name Robert Kan Jackman

Born	27 July 1934, Seattle, Washington, U.S.A.
1954 - 1957	Discovered Buddhism in Japan and San Francisco while in the U.S. Navy.
1964	Master's Degree, University of California, Burkeley, California, U.S.A. Peace Corps volunteer in Malaysia for 2 years. English language instructor at Thammasart University, Bangkok, Thailand. Practiced insight meditation under Pra Tham Thirarajamahamuni (Jodok Nyanasitthi). Mahathat Monastery, Bangkok, Thailand. Ordained as samanera (novice monk) at Nern Tanao Monastery, Nong Khai Province, Thailand. Received full Bhikkhu ordination at Sri Saket Monastery, Nong Khai Province, Thailand, with Pra Tham Pariyatimuni as preceptor. Studied and trained under the Venerable Ajahn Chah, Nong Pah Pong Monastery, Ubon Rajathani Province, Thailand.
1975	Abbot, Wat Pah Nanachat (International Forest Monastery) Ubon Rajathani Province, Thailand.
1976	Returned home to visit ailing mother, then travelled to England, met Mr. George Sharp, President of the English Sangha Trust.
1981	Abbot, Chithurst Buddhist Monastery, Chithurst, Petersfield, Hampshire, U.K.
1984 - present	Abbot, Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, Great Gaddesden, Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire, U.K.
1992	Received Royal Appointment as Pra Sumedhajahn.
2004	Received Royal Appointment as Pra Rajsumedhajahn.



Cultivating Gratitude*

By Venerable Ajahn Pasanno

On Saturday night Ajahn Amaro talked on the theme of gratitude and I'm going to speak on the same theme, mainly because Yom Pleon's putting us up to it. She was saying that people have been teasing her that she always prints books in Thai and never prints anything in English. So she started thinking ahead to the dedication ceremony of our new monks' utility building on July 4 this year. She wants to print a book and use Ajahn Liam's piece on gratitude that he wrote when he was here. She asked us if Ajahn Amaro and I would speak on gratitude and then she'll take those talks, transcribe them and put them into a little booklet for free distribution. I thought that was a wonderful idea. Of course, now I have to think of something to say...

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* Transcribed from a talk given at Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery, California, U.S.A. on November 10, 2009.

On a certain level, just that Yom Pleon had that kind of idea, that intention, is something worthy of gratitude. A sense that somebody wants to help us out, somebody wants to do something that's of benefit to others; that's something to be grateful for. When people want to do that, we should pay attention to those things and recognize them. That's when a lot of gratitude comes, when we pay attention to others and to the efforts that they make.

Also, when we put ourselves into a frame of mind that is willing to measure things not just from our own views, perspectives, feelings, but is able to extend our perception and way of viewing things: how others feel, how they think, how they perceive – then there can be room for a lot of gratitude. There is a certain network that draws us together. Empathy arises as well. There can be a lot of gratitude that comes into the heart when we're able to really extend ourselves beyond our own feelings, our own biases, our own perspectives. That is actually a very important thing to reflect on, because so often we tend to get caught up in how *we* feel, how *we* like things, what *we* dislike, what *we* want, what *we* don't want and we measure the world, measure ourselves and measure others from that perspective. Inevitably, that ends up being very limiting, very cramped and crowded. If we follow this

attitude it's easy to drift into negativity or just not to experience a sense of expansiveness in the heart, and that doesn't give much room for gratitude.

There's something that I read not that long ago, a book by Robert Wright, *The Evolution of God*. One of the things that he said was that in Islam, when they speak about somebody who's an "unbeliever," somebody who's outside of the religion, the more literal translation of that is "somebody who's ungrateful," which is very interesting in terms of the perspective of that religion. I didn't get the whole context, because I don't know enough about Islam, but it was a very interesting perspective for a world religion. It was interesting to see how they look at what is the criterion for somebody who is within the religion. That when somebody is a non-believer, that means a person who is not grateful. It's a very human experience in the sense that for somebody to cut themselves off from something depends on the inability to experience gratitude. It cuts one off from something very important, something that is the lifeblood of one's humanity. So that's an interesting little fact, that is worthy of reflection, or taking note of.

In reflecting on gratitude, there's a perspective created – a way of turning the mind away from negative mental states. The tendency we all have is that, if

we reflect on things, it's easy to get caught in the negative. But in the way the Buddha has us investigate things you can look at that which is the drawback, or the painful aspect of something, but you can also look at what is the benefit, what is the upside; you can reflect on things in that way.

When we live in the world, whether we're monastics or whether we're lay people, we're still swayed by the worldly winds. It's easy to be caught by things. For example, we're really not necessarily wanting to be praised, but when there is praise, then we feel a little bit comfortable. But when there's any kind of criticism or blame, then we get upset, we feel a sense of resentment or aversion, or get the feeling of defeat or frustration. Ajahn Chah would say when there is some kind of criticism or some kind of blame, if you can just turn it around you can actually reflect on what there is in it to be grateful for. It is an opportunity to look at things: "Well, look at that, I was expecting some kind of praise." Or when somebody points out our faults – it usually feels so painful to have some faults pointed out – Ajahn Chah would say, "Well, you should be grateful for that opportunity. It's rare that one has the opportunity to have one's fault pointed out. Then you have an opportunity to grow from that." It's called turning it on its head by giving

oneself an opportunity to use gratitude to flip it over.

In the same way, Ajahn Chah used to say we spend a lot of time wanting to be in good health and resenting illness and sickness. "I hear monks complaining, 'Oh, I couldn't practice. The whole rains retreat I was sick the entire time and couldn't practice.' Well, they should be grateful for an opportunity to recognize illness, sickness and death." That's real practice when we have a chance to reflect on these realities of human existence. But we tend to resent them or feel that "practice" is only "good" when things are going well, when we are able to reflect on the teaching in a real cogent and clear way. That's when we think the practice is "good." But when there are some difficulties or when we're experiencing illness, then we tend to resent that; we tend to feel intimidated by it. Instead there should be a sense that one could be grateful for the difficulties because we have the opportunity to learn from that. So it's just a simple act of reflecting, "I can learn from that, I can understand another aspect of human experience through that."

So it's a way of turning the mind. The turning of the mind is an essential part of practice that allows us to go beyond our comfort zone, to push the envelope a bit of what we feel is acceptable. This is useful because so much of our spiritual practice tends to in-

volve expending a tremendous amount of effort trying to make everything comfortable, acceptable. It's not just our spiritual practice. In the human condition, that's what human beings expend a huge amount of effort in doing: trying to make things comfortable, acceptable, secure, and resent or fear anything that's outside of that.

So, by using a quality like gratitude, it's a way of reflecting: "I can learn from this, I can appreciate something that's outside of my comfort zone, something that makes me work a bit harder." And sometimes what is especially supportive of our own practice is when we conceive that, "What I really need to do is to get beyond my comfort zone." In fact, in practice, we really do need to push ourselves a bit.

But then we also need to be cautious because, oftentimes, the pushing is just that: it's just pushing, or it's too forceful, or it has an edge of aversion or annihilation to it, "I'm going to annihilate these defilements, I'll destroy them." That tends to come from a very hard and almost unaccepting intention. When it comes from that attitude, it usually pushes back at us as well. What happens is that it sets up a dynamic in the mind where the mind is not fully at ease; the heart is not really settled. When it is like this, where is that quality of gratitude? We tend only to transcend things

in a genuine way when we rely on understanding. When we approach it from that perspective, we can put ourselves outside our comfort zone. There can be a sense of spaciousness and the mind is truly able to settle.

There's a discourse where the Buddha talks about the impossibility of realization for someone who is without gratitude, or we may say someone prone to stinginess. It's not stinginess about material things so much as a narrow approach to experiencing the world. Without relinquishing this quality of stinginess the mind is not able to experience First Jhana, Second Jhana, Third Jhana, Fourth Jhana, Stream Entry, etc. The mind is not able to enter those more settled states of concentration or be open to insight and penetration. So it's the underlying quality of the mind that helps lay the foundation for the mind to settle and be clear. That's an important reflection in the sense of, "What is it that allows the mind to settle fully? What are the qualities that will allow the mind to be genuinely peaceful?" It's the building of a momentum of well-being, a momentum of wholesome mental states that allow the mind to really settle.

Of course, gratitude is a powerful quality that allows the mind to be bright and we can reflect on that as we sit down for meditation – we cross our legs, get

ourselves set up, get our posture upright and, rather than going into minding the breath immediately, in-breath, out-breath, in-breath, out-breath – we reflect: "What do I have to be grateful for?" There's a different quality of the mind that arises when we turn the mind to review, and reflect: What are the things that are worthy of gratitude? What are the occasions where others have helped me? What circumstances have been favorable? What we are experiencing right now might not necessarily be so pleasant. We've all been around long enough to know that external conditions in terms of physical comfort, the world, the weather, the political climate, the social climate, the economic climate can be quite challenging. And then there are those human beings we have to live with, they can be really irritating sometimes. But if we focus on that, if we allow that to take over the mind, then it plays as if on a loop that goes through our consciousness, and we end up in negativity or dullness because we don't mindfully tune it out.

But if we direct our attention to something like gratitude, then it's not just a Polyanna-ish type of thing that tries to make everything look wonderful. Rather it's an attitude of, "Yes, there is all the rest of it, the difficulties, but I choose to look at something that helps to let my mind be bright because that's what has real

value in my life, that is what I want to make much of in my life, that which brings brightness and clarity and peace." It is about how we turn our attention and reflect. For example, today we had a meal offering that was in honor of Jay. If we wanted to, we could think of all the odd characteristics that Jay had. But would that be useful? Instead we can turn our attention to all of the qualities that Jay brought to us, things that are really worthy of gratitude.

One of the things that has stuck in my mind for a long time, even to this day, concerning Jay, was from the time when the cancer was really advancing; he was in a lot of discomfort and was getting pretty thin and wasn't eating because of the cancer in his mouth. He was coming down and preparing meals for us, although he wasn't even eating them himself. He was preparing meals for us and also came down for Kathina festival. He wasn't a people person but he made a point of coming down for Kathina last year (2008), just in order to be with people. And this past Kathina there were actually many people who mentioned that. People who don't come here all that often, and they were remembering Jay coming down here for last year's Kathina. Those are the things that bring up a sense of gratitude to the mind. And everybody has these different qualities that are worthy of

gratitude ... everybody has these on a certain level.

We have a picture of Ajahn Chah up here. We talk about Ajahn Chah being the great master who was a bright light for passing on the Dhamma to all of us and inspiring so many people. He certainly was that. And also he could be really irritating and frustrating to be around. It's very easy to live with a dead teacher. You can really idolize a dead teacher. But a real human being is more complex, and that's similar for all of us. It's easy to be less forgiving with a real person. That's why we need to make a conscious effort in directing our thoughts of gratitude, because when we do that we can realize the worth of that sense of gratitude and it can then gain momentum in the heart.

As I was saying before, when we direct attention to something that brings a sense of well-being, a wholesome state of mind, that's what allows the mind to foster the ability to settle and to concentrate. So, if one is aspiring to peaceful states of consciousness, *samãdhi,* then make a point of directing attention to those qualities of gratitude. But, if you want to stay agitated or restless, then you can let the mind dwell on aversion and the sense of irritation with the world around you, because that doesn't allow the mind to be peaceful.

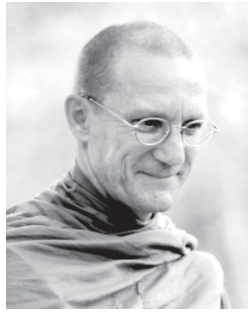
To really give up – that's an act of relinquishment – when we actually relinquish that voice in the mind that goes: "I should have done it like that." "It shouldn't be this way." "Why don't they do this?" "Why isn't it like that?" And the complaint may be true, it may be right. But what's the result of just complaining? Is it helpful or appropriate to allow that to take over? In terms of training the mind and directing attention to the qualities that will allow the mind to settle, to be peaceful, there's an act of relinquishment that's needed: relinquishing, letting go, and directing attention towards gratitude.

"Gratitude and contentment," as the Buddha says in the Mangalasutta "... these are the highest blessings." These are blessings because they bring peace. They bring clarity. It's not something that we wait around for the conditions in the world or the conditions in our life to be perfect so that we can feel grateful for nice things, and *then* have a sense of gratitude. But it's something that one brings attention to on a regular basis so that it becomes the habit of the mind. It's a training; it's a skillful way of giving a sense of "Oomph" to the mind that adds brightness to it.

So gratitude is a quality not just for establishing social harmony or for fulfilling some sort of duty

externally on the communal level, rather it's a quality that has very powerful ramifications and effects on the state of the mind, the internal training of the heart. And when we pay attention to that, it's sowing the seeds for real awakening to blossom within the heart.

So I offer that for reflection this evening.



Venerable Ajahn Pasanno
Former name Reed Perry

Born	26 July 1949, in Canada
Education	Bachelor's Degree in History
1973	Travelled to Thailand, received training in concentration meditation at Merng Mang Monastery, Chiengmai Province, Thailand.
1974	Received full Bhikkhu ordination at Pleng Vipassana Monastery, Bangkok, Thailand, with Pra Kru Nyanasirivat as preceptor. During the first Rains Retreat went to Nong Pah Pong Monastery, Ubon Rajathani, Thailand, on the advice of his preceptor to study and train under the Venerable Ajahn Chah.
1982	Abbot, Wat Pah Nanachat (International Forest Monastery), Ubon Rajathani Province, Thailand.
1996 - present	Co-Abbot, Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery, Redwood Valley, California, U.S.A. Travels to Thailand once a year to perform religious functions and teach his followers.

Gratitude to our Guides*

By Venerable Ajahn Amaro

One of the many wholesome qualities that the Buddha encourages us to develop, among the many different pieces of advice that is contained in the Tipitaka is the quality of gratitude, particularly gratitude to our parents. This is a very prominent theme in Asia and in the Pali tradition. Gratitude is *Kataññu* in Pali, and reciprocation is *Katavedi*. *Katavedi* is the response to generosity or kindness and is a way of indicating the quality of gratitude or gratefulness. *Kataññu-katavedi* is very often spoken of and commonly cultivated, and is considered a significant quality in people's lives in Asia.

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* Transcribed from a talk given at Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery, California, U.S.A. on November 7, 2009.

Sometimes in the West, this can seem like something that's a bit remote or distant, or something that doesn't have much meaning for us. But these are significant and useful qualities to reflect on. Why would the Buddha emphasize that so much? In various teachings, he points out that this is a beautiful and appropriate attitude to cultivate towards our parents – the quality of gratitude, *Kataññu-katavedi*. Because, as he says, another word for parents is "the first teachers." Why is that? Because our parents bring us into the world, they teach us how to live as human beings, they introduce the world to us, they enable us to function in the world. The well-known teaching in that respect is that the Buddha says how, even if you carried your mother on one shoulder and your father on another shoulder, you carried them around (I see that those who are literalists amongst us would think that could really be uncomfortable in the first place), even if you can carry them around for decades and decades, one parent on each shoulder, even to a point where they can no longer control their bodily functions and you have their excrement running down your back, you could not repay the debt of gratitude.

Even if you established your parents as universal monarchs, as the rulers of the whole world, still you could not repay the debt of gratitude. This is a very

emphatic way of speaking and holds up our parents in a very exalted position, in the sense of their being thoroughly worthy of our love and respect. The katavedi is so huge because of the incredible amount of effort, kindness and generosity displayed by our parents in bringing us into the world, looking after us, feeding us, taking care of us, tending to our every need, drying our tears, educating us, teaching us our language and our ways of being amongst other people.

Then the Buddha says how we can repay that debt, how we can respond appropriately: if our parents are unvirtuous and we establish them in virtue, if they are unwise and we establish them in wisdom, if they are stingy and we establish them in generosity. These are ways that we can repay that debt. It is in this way that we can respond appropriately to that enormous gift that our parents have given us.

So often in the West, where families are much more fragmented, people who have had very difficult experiences with their family do not like to talk in this way about gratitude to parents. Immediately the mind says, "Hohoho! Rubbish! You've never met my dad," or "If you knew my mother," or "If you had had a mother like I had, you wouldn't say that." "Carry her around on my shoulder? I won't even go into the same room with her. Won't even visit her estate." So, we

can sometimes feel a deep resentment and criticism, a negativity towards our parents. It's very easy to grow up in that way, although I don't perceive anybody here as having such a particularly deep-seated resentment. However, it's pretty common for us that we can carry around stories of how our parents did us wrong, or treated us badly and didn't look after us well, our having been neglected, or farmed off, or being unloved. Maybe we don't even know who our parents are but we were given up at birth for adoption, or our parents couldn't cope with us and we were taken care of by relatives. Maybe so.

This is one of the characteristics of life in the West. There is a sense we can easily have of how things were not perfect, or things weren't right, or things were unfair. So we can hear teachings about gratitude to parents and say, "It's all very well if you have ideal, perfect, loving, kind, gentle, wise parents, but I'm still recovering," or "Thank you very much! I've paid $30,000 in therapy fees and we haven't got there yet so, thank you very much but I think I'll leave now. This kind of talk doesn't apply to me." But hopefully it does.

We should consider that even people in Asia might have had parents that didn't look after them very well, abandoned them, or gave them away, or

didn't give them full attention, or didn't do a very good job of taking care of them and didn't love their children. It does happen there as well. It's not like over there it's utterly different. People are pretty much the same everywhere in the world, in many respects. So in this it's good to consider how we hold our parents in our minds and how we think of them.

Now, growing up, I found that I had a lot of negativity towards my father, particularly because he was very authoritarian and a somewhat rigid character, a very conservative English fellow. My mother was much more of a kindly and ever-generous, nurturing type. My father tended to be stiff and rigid, "I know what I know so don't give me any of your book-learning!" (That's a quote, by the way.) The tone of my teenage years thus tended to be that I was going head to head with my father, and complaining about how he was such a rigid, conservative, narrow-minded *yadda yadda yadda.* Yet when I had been ordained for a number of years and had reached my mid-30s, when I got to the age he was when he and my mother were married, then I started to be able to put myself in his shoes. It suddenly began to dawn on me that, actually, my father had done the best he could. And in my memories I would hear the resonances of my own complaining and grumbling, and the arguments of my child-

hood and teenage years. It resonated in my mind and I saw how critical, how unforgiving, how void of any real compassion and understanding I was.

Why should he know how to bring kids up? He was born in 1913 as the youngest child of a big family, grew up in an Edwardian British household and was sent off to a boarding school. After being in the army during the Second World War he met my mother and got married and there was no particular reason why he should have known what was the right thing to do in the process of raising children, how to look after the little ones; he didn't have any younger siblings. I remember hearing the story many times of how he said to my mother, when my eldest sister was born, as she, the proud parent, was holding her newly born baby – he really did say, "Do they always look like that?" [laughter] Truly! He was a classically insensitive Brit! About this she said, "If I hadn't been feeling so weak and feeble I would have socked him."

The question arose in me: "Why should he have known what would be the 'correct' way to relate to kids? They didn't give him any manual on how to raise children in the British Army. Going to boarding school in the 1920s you didn't get lessons in child care. Growing up as the son of the Empire that didn't happen ..." So I began to hear my own voice of complain-

ing, grumbling and criticizing, the favorite tapes that I would play in my mind of how everything was wrong with my father. But then what arose was a feeling of how unkind, how lacking in compassion I had been. It was quite possible, even probable that he was doing the very best that he could.

Even though we might feel we have a genuine cause for complaint about our parents' shortcomings and there may have been some seriously damaging results from living with them – neglect or poor treatment or physical violence of various kinds, and certainly I do not mean to belittle that – but it's also helpful to put ourselves in the shoes of our parents and to consider how people can try their best but still make mistakes. People can have a good heart but still not be perfect, and not fit our ideals. In this, in a way, I find the real root of gratefulness, of gratitude.

Rather than dwelling upon our parents' faults, always comparing them to an ideal and dwelling on the shortcomings, even if they are justified, we should look at the gifts that have come from them. We have the gift of life, a living body, we have a mind, we have the capacity to feel and to know, and we have the requisites for enlightenment. A body, a mind, the capacity for kindness and the capacity for understanding, the wisdom for mental training – we have these capaci-

ties. And the enormous benefit, the blessings that these comprise, is inconceivable. But it's easy for us, isn't it, to dwell upon the shortcomings, the things that didn't work out right, the things that were painful and the things that really did leave some scars, and to miss the wealth of blessings that have come to us.

In cultivating gratitude to our parents, it's not just a matter of taking an idealistic view for ourselves that, "I *should* be grateful; I should let go of all my complaints, my grumblings and negativity." It's also helpful – even in the light of the shortcomings and the difficulties, the things that weren't fitting the ideal – to look at the greater picture of what makes up our lives. While those things are painful results of actions we feel were poorly done, we should just see these as a wonderful opportunity for us to cultivate compassion and to cultivate the quality of forgiveness and a sense of empathy with how difficult human life is.

Why should our parents have always got it right? It's even strange that we should expect, let alone demand that. When we think it through, it's somewhat ridiculous but our idealistic mind can easily look for that. So it's a good opportunity to cultivate a sense of compassion, of kindness and of forgiveness. And whatever the difficulties are that have come from family life – inherited along with the blessings and the

benefits of our childhood – we realize these can also be a tremendous source of wisdom when we meet them with an open heart rather than with complaint, criticism or judgment.

When we meet those difficulties with openness, then there's a different chemistry there and the difficulties become source of insight. Ironically, it is oftentimes precisely those difficulties and painful areas of our lives that help us to wake up most effectively, and encourage us to develop a deeper understanding and a more all-encompassing quality of wisdom. It is when things are painful and difficult that we are encouraged and motivated to pay attention. With comfort we tend to drift off, whereas pain gets our attention. We have to see: What do I do with this? Where is it coming from? How can this be accommodated? How can this be understood?

Cultivating gratitude for our parents is not just a sweet sentiment that we're trying to paste over our lives; rather it's a source of deep practice, a source of wisdom, a source of profoundly wholesome qualities that we can develop.

Along with developing gratitude towards our physical parents the Buddha also encourages us to cultivate it in relationship to our spiritual teachers and with those who have helped us in our spiritual lives.

This means gratitude to those who have taught us and introduced us to the liberating teachings. Thus, in a similar way, despite whatever shortcomings there might be in our teachers, and things that our complaining minds can find to pick at, the Buddha exhorts us to nurture the sense of gratefulness, the quality of gratitude and to respect that connection with those who introduced us to the teachings and with those who have helped us along the way. This holds true whether we are still inspired by that person's actions or whether they have fallen from grace for some reason. Even though we might one day lose faith with that person – perhaps we find out that the one who first taught us meditation was a roaring alcoholic and had 15 bank accounts, 14 of which were seriously overdrawn – still the Buddha's teaching encourages us to maintain the sense of gratitude and always to pay respect to that person, always to hold them in our hearts.

There's a very beautiful story in the Suttas on this theme. The Venerable Assaji, who was an Arahant, one of the Buddha's first disciples, was also the first to introduce Venerable Sariputta to Buddha-dhamma. As the story goes, whenever Venerable Sariputta would lie down to rest at night, he would always consider "Now where is Venerable Assaji? Is he in the north, is he in the south, the east or the west?" When-

ever Venerable Sariputta would lie down to sleep, he always would lie with his head towards where Venerable Assaji was staying. This was because of the sense of, "This is the one who first taught me the Buddha's teaching, he was the one who introduced me to Buddha-dhamma, so I should always lie as if I were placing my head at his feet, as a gesture of respect towards him."

Ajahn Sumedho often tells the story of the monk who first took him to meet Ajahn Chah. In the early days of his monastic career he had been living for a year as a novice up in Nong Khai, a town on the Mekong River in the northeast of Thailand. He had been in this meditation monastery for a year but he had had an insight that, instead of living in a retreat situation alone in his kuti, practicing solitary meditation day after day, what he really needed was to be living in a community and, furthermore, he needed to study and learn the Vinaya, the monastic rule, which he had not given much attention to. To really live as a Buddhist monk effectively, he realized, he needed to give himself to a lifestyle that could be sustained over a long period. This necessarily would entail living in a community and also understanding the monastic training.

So around that time a forest meditation monk,

Tan Sommai, came and stayed at that monastery in Nong Khai. Ajahn Sumedho, who was newly ordained as a bhikkhu at that point, after having been a novice for a year, was very impressed by the demeanour of this monk and the way he conducted himself, so proper and restrained in every way. Obviously, he was someone who had learned the monastic rule in a very detailed manner and had committed himself to a very well-grounded meditation practice and training in mindfulness.

It also just so happened that, even though nobody in this monastery could speak any English, this monk, Tan Sommai, had been in the Thai Navy before he was ordained and had picked up some English while he was in the forces during the Korean War, so he could speak a little bit of English. So Ajahn Sumedho was able to ask him where he came from and how it was that he was able to conduct himself in such a restrained, tidy and impressive way: Where did he get his training from? How did he learn to be such a well-trained monk? So Tan Sommai told him about Ajahn Chah's monastery where he'd been living for the past six or seven years. That, in turn, inspired Ajahn Sumedho to want to go and meet Ajahn Chah. "That's exactly what I've been looking for; someone who can teach me monastic discipline and train me to live in a

community." So he asked his teacher and preceptor up in Nong Khai if he could go and train under Ajahn Chah for a while. Since Ajahn Chah's name was well-known and he had good reputation, the teacher said, "Yes, that's a very good idea." So that was how Ajahn Sumedho shortly afterwards came to visit Ajahn Chah.

Even though Tan Sommai was a very strict monk and kept all the rules seriously and was very proper, tidy and well-behaved, he also apparently had a somewhat uptight relationship to the Vinaya and would get very upset if even minor rules were broken. He was extremely particular about how things had to be done. Now, when you have an intense and uptight relationship with the monastic rule it can become very hard to sustain over the years. So, like many others of a similar habit pattern, he ended up disrobing.

Once he no longer had the monastic rule to keep his energies contained, his life very quickly spiralled downwards and he became a desperate alcoholic, was drunk a lot of the time and was in a very sad and painful condition. Nevertheless, he would still come and visit the monastery from time to time. He would stay nearby and would come in to see Ajahn Chah, filled with remorse and tearful. "Yes, yes, I want to give it up. I'll give it all up. I've had it with the bottle, I'm gonna straighten up, get sober ..." He would make

efforts to stop drinking but then would fall back again. He had a very poor reputation and wasn't respected at all. People tended to look down upon him, being such a sorry character.

One day Ajahn Sumedho was talking to Ajahn Chah and the subject of Sommai came up. Ajahn Chah said, "Whatever he does, no matter how low he falls, you should always recollect that he was the one who brought you here, and that's something very important. When he comes here you should always seek him out. You should express to him how grateful you are that he introduced you to Wat Pah Pong, to this place, and that he brought you to me. And even when he's not around you should always recollect that and dedicate the merits of your practice to him. This will be of great benefit to him because no matter how low he falls or how far things come apart, he'll be able to remember and know that there is at least one irrefutably good thing he has done in his life, one very powerful blessing that he has brought into the world. And that will benefit him, that will be a source of stability and orientation for him."

This story always impresses me. For that's what Ajahn Sumedho would do whenever Sommai came by; he would always seek him out and express his friendship and gratitude and so it was indeed something of

a beacon of hope and support in his life.

This is a very good standard for us to reflect upon; even though this fellow had fallen really low in his own eyes and his life was quite a mess, that's *just* one aspect of it, isn't it? We're not just a drunk; we're not just an angry person; we're not just a collection of faults. There's a whole wealth of wholesome qualities there too but, when we get fixated on our shortcomings, we neglect that, we forget that and the attention dwells on the flaws.

It's as if when we go to see the Mona Lisa we notice a chip on the frame, a little nick on the paint work, so we think, "Gosh, this is the most beautiful, most valuable painting in the world and look at that, the frame is dreadful, couldn't they have found anything better ... these French! Can't they look after their paintings!?..." We don't see the masterpiece because there's the chip in the paint work on the frame. That's what the eye goes to – the flaw, the mistake, the error – so we miss the masterpiece. Oftentimes there is a masterpiece but it's the errors that stand out. The flaw irritates us, and irritation gets our attention.

So, cultivating gratitude and appreciation, even in the light of serious shortcomings, is a very beautiful and helpful thing. Even in our teachers, even those who have become falling-down drunks, it's appropri-

ate to cultivate gratitude and appreciation for such people to repay the blessings that they have brought into our lives.

Similar to our parents and our teachers, the tradition we come from, the Thai Forest Tradition of Theravada Buddhism, is not a perfect institution, is not absolutely flawless, and is not a completely perfect fit for everybody. There are shortcomings, quirks and some peculiar characteristics here in Theravada Buddhism and in its scriptures, the Pali Canon. Various things may seem strange, or odd, or anachronistic. But again if we dwell on the things that we don't like, or that we criticize, or we see don't quite work, or don't make sense, or don't please us, then we miss the vast majority, the 99.9% that is brimming with incredible blessings. In this light, the cultivation of gratitude toward the tradition of practice involves, similarly, not ignoring its flaws or shortcomings and saying they're not there, but also not making those into things that the eye dwells upon.

Reflecting upon my parents – that despite whatever rigidity they might have had, how conservative, busy or distracted they might have been – still I was born because *they* gave me life; they taught me to speak, to read and to write, to relate to others in a skillful and wholesome way. The gifts that have come from

that are incalculable (just the act of giving this Dhamma talk, for one thing). With the Buddha-dhamma and all that is contained in the Pali Canon, the tradition that has come down through the elders in Asia, there is an equally incredible wealth of gifts and spiritual beauties that have come down to us. Similarly, we find that within the array of fine things we have inherited, there are things that don't fit well, are strange or go against the grain. Well, there are useful opportunities that arise from those difficulties and challenges. They become a source of wisdom in that we are pressed to find out how we can meet or understand them, how we can learn from them. So the difficulties become something we can be grateful for as well.

When Luang Por Liam was here earlier this year, on a couple of occasions, people asked him what had been the most difficult aspect of his practice. Was there any significant problem he had had in his practice? I remember him saying, "Well, there's been some fear at certain times, and that was something. But, you know, it's not really helpful to think in terms of 'problems,' or 'obstructions'; in reality it's more useful to think of these as being worthy opponents. These are not the enemy; in fact these factors are what actually help us to grow. It is through having to deal with these

particular issues, these things that don't fit our preferences, that we find we develop our best qualities. We have to raise our game." When we have a strong and skilled opponent, we have to rise to that; we have to find resources within us that perhaps we didn't even know were there.

Someone was once very impressed by watching and listening to Luang Por Chah's teaching. They said, "Oh, Luang Por, you are so incredibly wise, your understanding is so all-encompassing, you seem to have answers to everything, you must have spent years and years studying the Tipitaka, learning the Abhidhamma and figuring out the ways to answer everybody's problems. You must have accumulated a vast store of knowledge through learning the Suttas to arrive at such wisdom." He replied, "No, not particularly. The only reason I have any wisdom is because I have had enormous defilements; that's the real cause. It is because, in the past, I have experienced voluminous lust, ferocious anger, incredible restlessness and have been plagued with numerous doubts." He described how it was through having to deal with those difficulties that he had developed whatever wisdom he had, as well as any understanding and empathy for other people's problems.

My understanding of Thai was very rudimen-

tary, and still is, but often people would come to see him and they would spill out the problems they were having in their lives, often highlighting the defilement they were currently facing. Almost invariably the first thing he would say would be "Yes, I used to be like that." They would say, "I'm angry with my brother; he's such an idiot," and he would reply, "Yes, I know that feeling, I used to get that way about my brother too." Whether it was doubt or restlessness, lust or fear, Luang Por would almost invariably say, "Yes, I've seen the same thing in myself. I know that one."

This principle of learning from our difficulties isn't a peripheral issue let alone just an idealistic sentiment, "Oh yes, our greatest problems are our greatest gifts; we should be grateful for them." That's an ideal but, in a deeper sense, this principle is a real centerpiece of Dhamma practice. This mindful meeting of difficulties is the engine of wisdom.

The forest meditation tradition is also called "the dhutanga tradition." The dhutangas are the ascetic practices that the Buddha allowed. *"Dhutanga"* in Pali, or "tudong" in Thai, translates literally into English as "a means of shaking off." They are a means to help us shake off attachments and the defilements. These thirteen practices are ways that we deliberately invite our lives to be more difficult, generally by mak-

ing them simpler in relation to aspects such as food, sleep, clothing and shelter. With the dhutangas we have less possessions and we have more restrictions. They involve things like: eating only one meal a day so we get hungry more often; we eat everything out of our bowls, so we can't separate out our carrots and our peas, our lasagna and our chocolate soufflé, they all go in together; not lying down at night so we're never comfortable and we'll always have to work with sleepy feelings; and suchlike ...

These are restrictions that most of us following the forest meditation tradition will do some or all of the time. This is the style of our lives within the dhutanga tradition. Thus we're deliberately looking for difficulty. However, it is because it's deliberate, and we're turning our attention to it consciously, that every such meeting with difficulty is what enables us to raise our game. It causes us to delve more deeply into the heart, to find resources of patience, understanding and compassion, resources of wisdom we wouldn't have had access to if we were just following our ordinary habits and the desires of an average day.

So this quality of gratitude for difficulties is not just a sweet sentiment – "I'm so happy that I had a miserable childhood," "I'm so happy that I have this terrible ache in my knee," "I'm so happy that this

Dhamma talk is going on and on, even though I really need to go to the bathroom" – that we are aiming to be pasting on top of things; rather it is a quality of open-hearted appreciation that we can access and use, for everybody's benefit. It can help us to be more spacious in our attitudes, to find that heart of great accommodation where we are able to be more patient and we can let go of time altogether.

This attitude also enables us to get to the root of compassion. We recognize : yes, that's so painful what this fellow is experiencing, that must have been really difficult to be growing up like that, and not to know what to do, what end of the baby to hold. In addition it takes us to the very root of wisdom, where we can attend to the moment without entanglement but with genuine understanding.

Venerable Master Hua, the abbot of The City of Ten Thousand Buddhas and the one who gave us half the land here at Abhayagiri, was as good as Venerable Ajahn Chah with producing nifty little teaching phrases, aphorisms of Dhamma to keep in mind. One of his expressions that I have jotted down in my book of quotable quotes is: "The Buddha-dharma arises from difficulty, the more difficult the better." Now this is not a masochistic tradition (in case you had begun to get that impression) rather there's a conscious use

of difficulty so that we're not always responding to dukkha and obstruction with heedless complaining. Even if we've got good reasons and an absolutely justifiable cause for our complaints, with evidence and witnesses; even though we can find a good reason why things are wrong and shouldn't be this way. That may be the case. But instead we train the heart to respond with an openness of attitude, turning towards the difficulties that we experience.

This is the first step of applying the Four Noble Truths – fully apprehending and understanding the presence of dukkha – and that turning towards eventually ripens in the cessation of that very dukkha, once we have let go. It is then that we find there is the genuine gratefulness for those difficulties, a genuine gratefulness to the situation, whether it's a dhutanga practice we have consciously chosen, the scars of our childhood, illnesses that we have, our own shortcomings, challenging people that we live with or the institutions which we live in. It can be an almost endless list: the difficulties that come from living under the precepts, the difficulties that come from living in an ancient tradition, the difficulties of having the mother and father that we have, the difficulties of living in the society that we do ... Rather than complaint and criticism, griping and sniping, there's a turning towards and open-

ing to all of that. We reflect, "What can I learn from this? This is absolutely what I don't want. I don't like this and it doesn't fit. OK, what can that teach me? How can I get bigger and accommodate that? How can I find a place where this belongs?"

In this way, like Luang Por Chah, we can take those points of friction, those defilements, the difficulties where life doesn't seem to fit, and then turn them into wisdom. Let the sparks thrown up by that friction be the cause of bringing light into the mind, light into our world. And then the gratitude for those difficulties will be genuine, not just a sweet sentiment or an ideal, but absolutely real. The gratitude that we will feel for our parents will be absolutely true, both for the obvious blessings they have given us, and also for the difficulties that we've inherited. We're genuinely grateful for and appreciative of all of these qualities that have come from them, and from all the sources that provide nourishment for our lives.

I offer this for reflection this evening.

Venerable Ajahn Amaro
Former name J. C. J. Horner

Born	1956, England
Education	Degree in Psychology & Physiology, Bedford College, London University, London, England
1978	Travelled to Thailand to study and train under the Venerable Ajahn Chah, Nong Pah Pong Monastery, Ubon Rajathani Province, Thailand.
1979	Received full Bhikkhu ordination, with the Venerable Ajahn Chah as preceptor in April 1979. Returned to England in October 1979 and then trained under Venerable Ajahn Sumedho at the newly founded Chithurst Buddhist Monastery (Cittaviveka).
1983	Walked the length of England on tudong, to stay at Harnham Monastery for two years.
1985	Came to Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, for several years, spending the last two as Deputy Abbot.
1990	Travelled to California, U.S.A. to lead meditation retreats for 2 to 3 months every year.
1996	Moved to California, U.S.A. to set up Abhayagiri Monastery.
Written works	*Tudong - The Long Road North* (A Journal of 830 miles of Tudong from Chithurst to Harnham). In 1993 a book of talks & travelogues was printed called *Silent Rain*, including some parts of *Tudong*. In 1999 he edited a new English edition of *The Pilgrim Kamanita* (*Kamanit-Vasitthi* in Thai).

	Small Boat, Great Mountain, in 2003.
	The Island - an Anthology of the Buddha's Teachings on Nibbana, published in 2009 with Ven. Ajahn Pasanno.
Travel	He travelled to India, Nepal, Bhutan from June 2004 until June 16, 2005.
Present	Co-Abbot, Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery, Redwood Valley, California, U.S.A.
	Appointed to be abbot of Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, Hertfordshire, England, when Ven. Ajahn Sumedho retires in November 2010.

Mother…the Giver*

By Venerable Ajahn Nyãnadhammo

Today is a very important day in all our lives because it's Mother's Day. Our mother is a giver of life who brings us into this world. It is also the birthday of Her Majesty the Queen who is looked upon as the mother to the whole nation due to her kindness to the Thai people and everyone living in Thailand. Additionally, this year's Mother's day falls on a Buddhist observance day. So today is a very important day for all good people because good people always acknowledge the compassion of their parents, of their Monarchs and of their religion.

We are all gathering here today at Wat Pah Nanachat with wholesome intention because we have

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* Translated from the Thai language book *Mae...Pu Hai* by Udomporn Sirasudhi

recollected with gratefulness the incalculable kindnesses of these important people in our lives: our mother, Her Majesty the Queen the royal consort of His Majesty King Bhumipol the King of Thailand – both of whom have provided us with a land of peace and happiness to live in – and most importantly, the Lord Buddha, our supreme teacher. We have come to the monastery to make merits through the offerings of gifts and observing the 5 or 8 precepts. We are making merits today in order to dedicate the result of these good merits to our mothers and to Her Majesty the Queen on the occasion of Mother's Day.

According to one of the Suttas, it is very difficult to repay the debt of gratitude to our parents. The Buddha says that even if we can carry our mother and father on our shoulders for a hundred years, we cannot fully reciprocate their kindness. Even if we were to carry them, one on each shoulder, for the rest of our lives we will still not repay the debt we owe them because the kindness they have bestowed upon us is truly incalculable.

Consider the Buddha's own life, we've learned that after his birth his mother passed away when he was only 7 days old. He lost the most important, the most beloved, person in his life when he was still such a young baby. Although he had a step mother named

Mahapajapati who looked after him and took full care of him perfectly well, the death of his mother could have been one of the causes that made him aware later on of the suffering caused by birth. This is because his birth had brought misfortune to his mother. Birth is suffering, a cause for pain, and even in some cases, death.

Yet despite any discomfort and pain brought on by pregnancy, our mother's love for us is evident even before we were born. She loved us by avoiding harmful food and eating only what was nutritious. She tried her best to stay healthy for the benefit of her unborn child. This is because of her love for her child even though she didn't even know what kind of a person her child will grow up to be; what he/she will look like, whether tall or short, fair of skin or dark, intelligent or dull, good or bad, polite or impolite, etc. She didn't know any of these things, but still she loved the child in her womb unconditionally. Her only wishes were to keep the child safe from harm, to be able to care for the child the best she could, and to provide for his/her every comfort.

Such is the all-encompassing mother's love for her unborn baby in her womb who sleeps and consumes the energy from the mother's own flesh and blood in order to grow. When it is time for the baby

to be born, the delivery process can be fatal to the mother but she doesn't worry about her own safety, she only wants her baby to be born safe and sound. This is how a mother thinks.

After the child is born, the mother endeavours to find the best way to care and provide for her baby so the baby can grow strong on its mother's milk which comes from the mother's own blood supply. As the child grows up, the mother always gives tender loving care to make her child happy and comfortable. When mosquitoes land on her child she gently whisks them away. When her child is sick, she is even more sick with worry because of her love for her child. So strong is her attachment to her child. She wishes him/her to be healthy, to be a good person, to have a good life, to be safe. This is a mother's love for her child; it never ends.

So, this is the loving kindness which we receive from our biological mother. But there are other kinds of mothers. The Buddha says we have 3 kinds of parents in our lives. Our first parents are those who conceive us and give us physical birth. These are the parents who give us life. But the parents who conceive us and give birth to us may not necessarily be the parents who bring us up. For example, the Buddha's mother passed away 7 days after he was born, so his

aunt who became his step-mother took excellent care of him until he left home to attain Enlightenment. After he became the Buddha, the Awakened One, possessing the Eye of Wisdom, being the first of the Noble Ones, he didn't forget to reciprocate his parents' kindness. He returned home to teach his father and his step-mother. His father became an Arahant, an Enlightened One, and his step-mother Mahapajapati later ordained as a Bhikkhuni and became an Arahant, an Enlightened One, as well. This is how the Buddha says we can repay the debt of gratitude of our parents: if they are ignorant and we can establish them in wisdom, if they have wrong view and we can establish them in right view, if they have no faith in charity or generosity and we can establish them in charity and generosity. These are the right ways in which we can reciprocate their kindness.

These second kind of parents the Buddha refers to as the nurturing parents who bring us up, take care of us. Sometimes, nurturing parents can take even better care of us than our biological parents because they are kind and compassionate towards us and wish us to grow and prosper. So, today we should think about the parents who gave us life and the parents who nurtured us as well.

The third kind of parents that the Buddha says

we should think about with gratitude are our **parents in Dhamma**. They are the ones who help us understand about life, teach us about merit and demerit, good and evil, what is moral and immoral, useful deeds and harmful deeds. They are the parents who give birth to our "Eye of Wisdom" and our spiritual understanding. They are a very important kind of parents. This is why we call our teachers in the Buddha-Dhamma, who gave birth to us in the Buddhist religion, "mothers and fathers of truth." For example, the Venerable Luang Por Chah is our "parents of truth." He acts like both a mother and a father, nurturing our spiritual growth and well-being. He introduced us to the teachings, gave our life a guiding light, taught us about virtue, what is appropriate and what is not, what must be done and what must not be done, what is our duty, what is the duty of the laity and what is the duty of monastics, so that everyone knows one's duty.

Because our teachers gave birth to us in truth, we have to regard them as our spiritual parents. Western monks have foreign parents but after we have been born into the Buddhist religion, we must consider our teachers and preceptors as our parents who gave birth to us, who made us a monk. So today we should also think of our teachers with respect and reverence,

and with kataññu-katavedi. Kataññu means one who is grateful for kindness received, and katavedi means one who reciprocates those acts with gratitude. It's not enough just to be grateful for the good things we received but we have to repay that debt of gratitude as well. The Buddha says it is good to be grateful, but that's not enough. We have to find a way to return the kindness that we have received.

The Buddha reminds us of our duty to repay the kindness of our mother and father for having taken care of us. They raised us, looked after us from birth until we are grown up. Now when they are old and need our help and support, we have a moral obligation to look after them and take care of them in return – willingly and without hesitation. The Buddha says in one of the Suttas that a person who has kataññu-katavedi to his parents will not decline but will only flourish. On the other hand, a person who doesn't acknowledge the blessings of their parents will decline and never prosper. Therefore, if we wish to have obedient and respectful children, we should first provide an example by showing obedience and respect to our parents. We show respect to our parents by looking after them and assisting them in any way we can. If we are able to do this, it means we have kataññu-katavedi, are grateful and kind. These are very impor-

tant qualities in our lives.

However, when we look after our parents, don't expect anything in return or for them to acknowledge our good deeds. When we were young, our parents took care of us but we thought nothing of it at the time; we took it for granted and saw that it was their duty to take care of us. We expected to be taken care of. Mother would make our food and we wouldn't think it was anything to be grateful for; it was her responsibility. That's how we understood it then because we were too young to know any better. But now that we are mature, we have to think like an adult, that is, we should find ways to return the blessings and the gifts of love of our parents.

Whether or not our parents feel grateful for the good things that we're about to do for them, that's not the point. It's our duty, and we're simply performing our duty and that's all there is to it. It's not important that they appreciate our deeds, or praise us or admire us, because we're only fulfilling our noble duty. They had taken care of us so well without asking for any thanks or any word of praise. They did their duty the best they could. Now we have a responsibility to look after them to the best of our ability without expecting anything in return. We don't expect them to say thank you. We don't expect them not to complain. We don't

even expect them to always treat us nicely. We're only doing our job as well as we possibly can, just as they had done for us earlier. This is what the Buddha says is the first duty of children: to repay the debt of gratitude to parents, i.e., **"Because they have supported us, we shall support them."**

The second duty for us to do for our parents is: **"When we're grown up, we shall do their duties."** Since they were the one's that raised us to the point that we are capable of doing our jobs and taking on responsibilities, it's therefore our duty to help our parents with their responsibilities, thereby lightening the burden they have to carry. We could do this by taking on their household activities, helping out with social and family responsibilities so that they have less to worry about. Our aging parents will feel relief that they no longer have to carry such heavy burden of the family alone. They will be happy that they have raised good and responsible offsprings. On the contrary, if we act irresponsibly to the family and in our personal affairs, and do not help them at all, it implies that we are not mature and responsible because these qualities mean a willingness to make self-sacrifices. But when we are responsible and mature, we are capable of carrying the burdens for others. Our parents will then find comfort in not having to carry this weighty

responsibility any longer. We do this also for our own peace of mind, to know that we can help so that they can be comfortable in old age.

The next duty that children should do for their parents according to the Buddha is: **"We shall keep up the honor and traditions of the family."** Our parents hope that we will have a good reputation and not bring shame on the family. They hope that we will strengthen the family's happiness and good reputation and be a shining example or at least not cause any suffering or disgrace to the family. The Buddha says that sometimes a person can be born into an immoral family, but he/she can bring light to that family by living virtuously, being kind, good, honest and hard working. That person will then lift up the reputation of that family, both in the worldly and spiritual sense. We need to work hard to earn money and to keep the money that we have earned by spending responsibly. In this way we shall protect the honor of our family, maintain the family's wealth and prevent our family from decline. We have all heard of famous families all over the world that fell into disrepute because their offsprings were immoral or went beyond the limit of good conduct which reflected badly on the family. On the other hand, some families may not have a good reputation to start with, but their offsprings are moral

and good. They managed to establish their parents in virtue resulting in the improvement of the family's reputation until they become well respected. Therefore, it's our duty to protect and maintain our family honor and reputation.

The fourth duty is: **"We shall protect the family heritage."** We should not overspend on luxuries but should know that the things we have in life we didn't earn totally by ourselves but were the results also of our parents' hard work and sacrifice. If there is only one plate of food, a mother would go hungry so that her children may eat. She does so because of her deep love for her children. She often buys clothes for her children before buying for herself. If she has only 10 cents, she would use it to buy things for her children, so they can be happy and comfortable. She doesn't worry about herself because her children's welfare always comes first. Our parents send us to school so we can be well educated, because they want us to have the opportunity to find good jobs and make a good living. They give us their money or the family savings so that we can invest in our own business. After all they have done for us, we need to show our gratitude by protecting the family heritage and making it grow even more by making the right investment. We should earn our living by the right means,

or *Sammã-ãjiva,* and avoid wrong means of livelihood, or *Micchã-ãjiva.* This is one way that we can repay the blessings of our parents.

The fifth and last duty according to the Buddha is: **"After our parents' death, we shall make merits and dedicate the goodness of our practice to them."** We should dedicate the results of our good deeds whether performed in past lives or in this live to our mothers and fathers, to all our relatives and friends, wherever they may be born. If they happen to be suffering in a woeful state of existence, may the goodness of our practice release them from that unhappiness. If they are in a blissful state of existence, may they become even happier. If our parents have already passed away, it's our duty to dedicate the merits of our good deeds to them everyday, not once a year, but every day – preferably before going to sleep each night. We dedicate to them the merits we've performed so that they can be happy knowing that we are leading a good life and thinking of them with kindness and gratitude.

Furthermore, we should make a firm resolution that we shall dedicate all the merits that we have made during our lifetime to our parents. For example, those of us who've come here to observe the 5 or 8 precepts or to make offerings to the monastic community

should share these merits with our parents, wishing them to know that we are following the teachings of the Noble Ones. When our parents know this, they will surely rejoice that they had brought us up to be good citizens of the world, and that their hard work hadn't been wasted. We will honor our parents with our good practices, and will revere the Lord Buddha by following his teachings.

If we can uphold our resolution, we will be making incalculable merit which will in turn bear excellent results. Although our parents gave us life, it's up to us to use the life we have been given to do good. In the Round of Rebirth in which all living beings must go through the infinite process of birth and death, everyone we meet in life used to be our mother or father, son or daughter, family or friend, in our previous existences. We don't only have this one mother, but a countless number of mothers in the cycle of existence. We are surrounded by our mothers, so we should treat all women respectfully as though everyone of them has been our mother. We should respect those who have done good things for us or have been kind to us. We should endeavour to treat everyone as if they are our mother or father, family or friend.

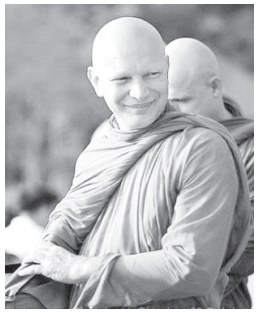
This is why in Thailand there is a custom in which monks refer to our lay supporters as "Yart

Yom," meaning "relatives and friends," because they play the role of parents to the Sangha. Through their kind-hearted support, they make it possible for monks to grow and prosper in the Buddhist religion. While we regard our teachers as our birth parents, we think of our lay supporters as our nurturing parents. All of our Yart Yom – relatives and friends in Dhamma – have shown strong faith in the teachings and have willingly made sacrifices by providing us with food and other requisites to enable us to devote ourselves fully on monastic observances as laid down by the Buddha, so that we may attain to the bliss of Nibbãna.

Since we regard our lay supporters as our nurturing parents who take care of us fully and completely, we feel a strong sense of *mettã* loving–kindness towards our lay supporters, because we realize that the kindness they bestow upon us is enormous. We know how very difficult it is to repay this debt of gratitude. The only way we can make repayment is by giving to them in return gifts of the Dhamma and to devote ourselves to the spiritual training as prescribed by the Buddha. When we teach the Dhamma, it is in the hope of establishing our relatives and friends in virtue. We aspire that they will fill their lives with good thoughts and wholesome actions so that they will eventually know the happi-

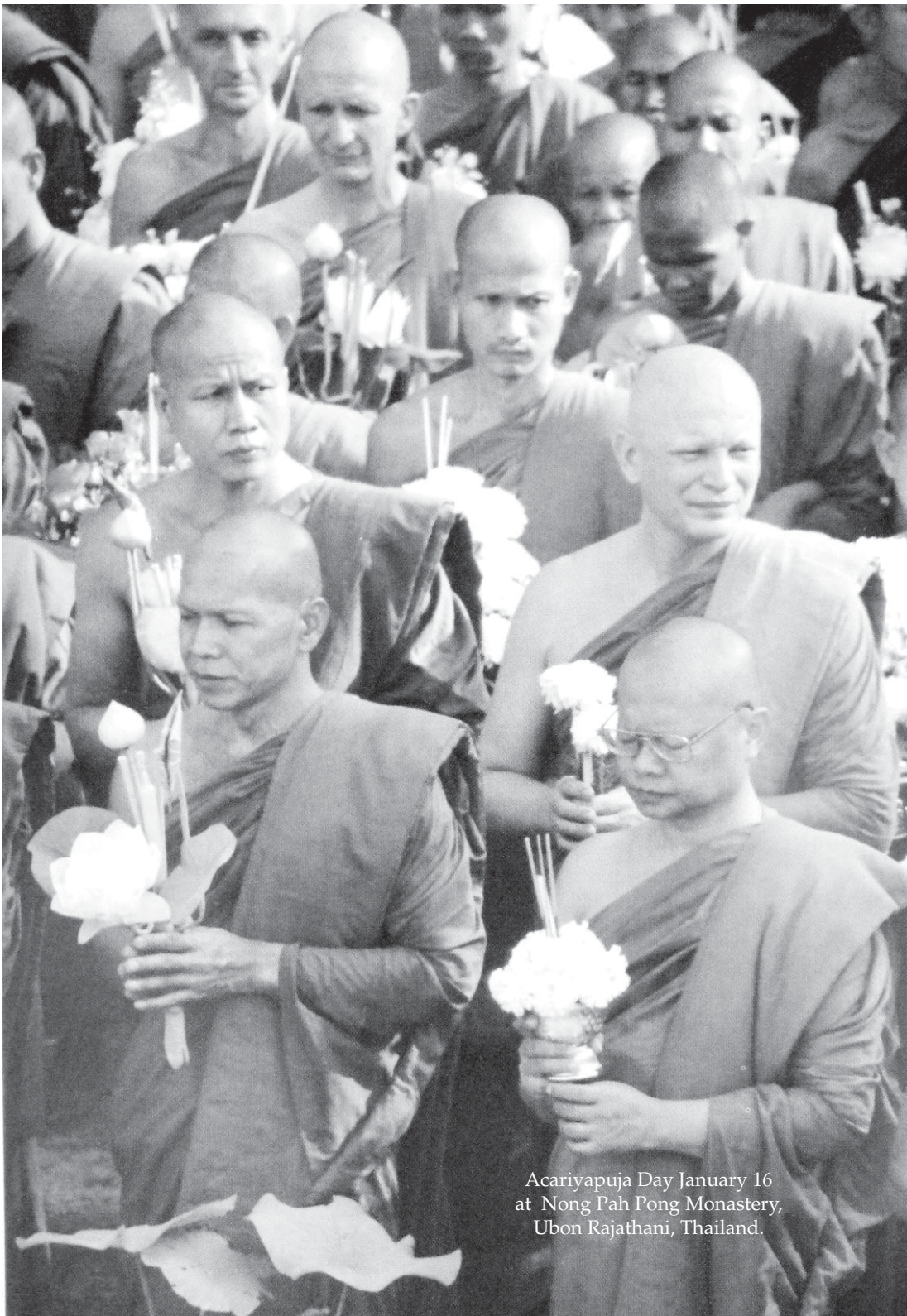
ness of heaven and then Nibbãna.

Today is an auspicious occasion for us to think about our mothers. There are 3 kinds of mothers: the birth mother, the nurturing mother and the mother in Dhamma who taught us, gave birth to us in the Buddhist religion and showed us the way to the ultimate goodness. This is also the occasion to develop this goodness, not only today, but for the rest of our lives, so that we can dedicate the good merits we've made to our mothers as a way to show our gratitude for all the things they have done for us. We should all make a commitment to always perform good deeds, to cultivate our spiritual perfections *(pãrami)* and to fulfil our duties by showing gratitude and appreciation to those who deserve it.



Venerable Ajahn Nyanadhammo
Former name Phillip John Robert

Birth place	Adelaide, Australia.
----	Was a biology teacher before joining the monastic community at Buddha Dhamma Monastery in Sydney, Australia.
1978	Travelled to Thailand on the advice of Ajahn Khantipalo, the Abbot of Buddha Dhamma Monastery. Received samanera (novice monk) ordination from Somdej Pra Nyanasangvorn at Wat Bovornnivesviharn, Bangkok, Thailand, then went to train under Ajahn Fak Santidhammo at Khao Noi Monastery, Chantaburi Province, Thailand.
1980	Received full Bhikkhu ordination at Nong Pah Pong Monastery, Ubon Rajathani Province, Thailand, with the Venerable Ajahn Chah as preceptor. Observed the Dhutanga practice and spent 5 Rains Retreats at various branches of Nong Pah Pong Monastery, then wandered alone on tudong in northern Thailand for several years.
1994	Deputy Abbot of Bodhinyana Monastery, Perth, Australia where he performed religious functions and disseminated the Buddhist teachings for 8 years.
2002 - 2007	Abbot, Wat Pah Nanachat (International Forest Monastery), Ubon Rajathani Province, Thailand.
2007 - present	Abbot, Ratanawan Forest Monastery, Nakorn Rajasima, Thailand.



Acariyapuja Day January 16
at Nong Pah Pong Monastery,
Ubon Rajathani, Thailand.

Daughters and Sons*

By Venerable Ajahn Jayasãro

Many years ago before I was ordained as a monk, I believed that wisdom came from experience. So I left my home country of England for India, roaming around and gathering life experience in Europe and Asia. The more difficult it was, the more I liked it because I felt that difficulties helped me to know myself better, and that was beneficial to my life.

But the overland trip to India was a little disappointing. It was not as challenging as I expected, and so on the way back I resolved to travel from Pakistan to England without any money. I wondered if it would be possible to hitchhike all the way back, and I also wanted to know how it would feel to have nothing at all.

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* Translated from the Thai language original by Hadaya

It was quite an adventure, several occasions I will never forget. I would like to tell you about one of them. By the time I arrived in Tehran—the capital city of Iran—I was exhausted. I was as thin as a stick, my clothes were all dirty and crumpled, and I must have looked pretty awful. I was shocked when I saw myself in the mirror of a public restroom. As for my mind, it was more and more like that of a hungry ghost, constantly worrying about food: "Will I get anything to eat today or not?" Whether my stomach would be empty or full depended on the kindness of fellow human beings. I had to rely on my parami because there was nothing else to rely on.

And then I met an Iranian man who felt sorry for me and also saw a chance to practice his English. He treated me to a cup of tea and gave me a small amount of money. At night, I slept on the street, hidden in a small, quiet alley. I was afraid that policemen would beat me up if they found me. In the morning, I walked to a soup shop that I remembered served free bread. While I was walking along the street, trying not to look at the tempting restaurants in the corner of my eyes and not to smell the aroma that lingered in the air, I noticed a woman walking toward me. She looked stunned when she saw me. She stopped in her tracks, stared for a moment, and then walked up to me with

a scowl on her face. Using sign language, she told me to follow her, and being a seeker of experience I did. After walking for about ten minutes we reached a townhouse, and rode an elevator to the fourth floor. I assumed we were going to her apartment, but she still had not said a single word. No friendly smile, just a fierce face.

Once the door was opened, I saw that it was indeed her apartment. She took me to the kitchen and pointed to a chair, signaling me to sit down. Then she brought me many kinds of food. I felt as if I was in heaven. It made me realize that the most delicious food in the world is the food you eat when you're truly hungry and your stomach is growling. The woman called out to her son and said something to him which I couldn't understand, but I noticed that he was around my age. The son came back after a while, with a pair of pants and a shirt. When she saw that I'd finished eating, the woman pointed to the bathroom and signaled me to bathe and change into the new clothes. (I guessed she planned to burn my old ones.) She didn't smile at all, said nothing, and made herself understood with sign-language. While bathing I thought that maybe this lady saw in me her own son and was thinking: "What if my son traveled to a foreign country and had a hard time like this?" "What if he was in such a

pitiful situation?" "What would that be like?" I thought that she must have helped me with a mother's love. I decided to appoint her my 'Honorary Persian Mother' and smiled to myself alone in that bathroom.

When I was ready, the woman took me back to the spot where we met and left me there. She merged back into the stream of people who were walking to work. I stood there watching her disappear into the crowd, and deep inside knew that I would never forget her in my entire life. I was very moved and my eyes were teary. She gave so much to me even though we didn't know each other at all. I was as skinny as a dried corpse, my clothes were dirty and smelly, and my hair was long and messy. But she didn't mind that at all, she even took me into her house and took as good care of me as if I was her own son, without expectation of anything at all in return—not even a word of thanks. It has been over twenty years now, and I would like to publicly extol the virtue of this sulky faced *bodhisattva,* so that everyone will know that even in a big city, there are still good people and there may be more good people than we think.

This woman was not the only good-hearted person I met. I received kindness and help from people in many countries while I was traveling and collecting life experience, even though I did not ask

anyone for anything. It made me determine in my mind that in future if I was in a position to help others in the same kind of way, I would. I wanted to help to sustain the spirit of human kindness in the world. Society can seem a hard and heartless place sometimes, but I thought we can each try to be at least a small oasis in the desert.

I didn't get all the way back to England. I lost my passport near the Turkish border and returned to Tehran where I made friends and got a job teaching English. After a few months, with some money in my pocket, I returned to India. My nineteenth birthday found me living by the side of a lake with a Hindu monk. He was an inspiring teacher whose practices were similar to Buddhism and he taught me many things. While I stayed with him, I had plenty of time to contemplate my life. In the afternoon I liked to climb up a nearby mountain, sit under an old tree, and enjoy the breeze. Looking down to the lake below and the desert that expanded all the way to the horizon allowed me to think clearly. One day my mind became full of questions. Why was it that whereas I was so impressed every time I remembered the kindness of the people who had helped me during my journey—those who gave me food or shelter for a night or two—I'd never felt the same way about the kindness

of my parents. They'd looked after me for eighteen years, given me food every single day—three or four times a day—and they'd still worried that the food might not be delicious enough for me. They'd given me both clothes and shelter. They'd taken me to a doctor when I was sick, and when I was ill they'd seemed to suffer more than I did. Why was I never impressed with that? I suddenly felt that I'd been shamefully unjust. I realized how much I'd taken them for granted. At that moment, it was as if a dam burst. Many examples of my parents' *boon khoon,* their generosity and kindness, came to my mind, so overwhelming, so impressive. That was the beginning of my gratitude toward my parents.

I continued to imagine how difficult it must have been for my mother when she was pregnant. At the beginning she must have had morning sickness, and later on it would have been difficult for her to walk. All kinds of movement must have been cumbersome and painful. But she accepted the suffering because she believed that there was something worthwhile in it, and that something was me.

When I was young I had to depend on my parents for everything, but why did I feel indifferent—as if it was their duty to give and my right to receive? After a while, I realized that I gained the op-

portunity to practice Buddhism, in order to develop a true inner refuge, because my parents had provided me with a stable, dependable external refuge when I was young. They'd given me a strong foundation for my heart to take on the battle with the defilements.

When I was 20 years old, I traveled to Thailand to be ordained as a Buddhist monk. My parents made no objections because they wanted their son to live his life the way he wanted and to be happy. My parents chose this over their own hopes for me. Last year my mother confessed to me that the day I left home was the saddest day of her life. I was very moved by this. What impressed me the most was the fact that she had been very patient and concealed this suffering from me for twenty years, because she didn't want me to feel bad about it.

After I became a monk, sometimes I couldn't help reproaching myself. While I lived with my parents, every day I'd had the opportunity to do things for them in return for their love, and hardly ever did so. Now I had the desire to express my sense of gratitude in tangible ways but could not: I was a monk and lived thousands of miles away from them. What a pity. And yet I could do what monks have done for over two thousand years, and sent them thoughts of loving kindness every day.

In Thailand we regularly refer to the 'boon khoon' of parents. There is no exact equivalent to this concept of 'boon khoon' in the English language, but we may explain it to mean the belief that whenever we receive kindness or assistance from anyone—especially when it is given freely—we incur certain obligations. A good person is one who honours those obligations, and the deepest of those obligations is to our parents. The Buddha taught us to develop both a deep appreciation of the debt of gratitude we owe to our parents, and the intention to repay it as best we can.

This is not a value that I was brought up with. In Western cultures there is, of course, love and attachment between parents and children, but generally speaking the sense of mutual obligation is much weaker. Values such as independence and individual freedom are given more weight. A special, profound bond between parents and children may be felt by many, but it is not articulated as a moral standard that upholds the society, as it is in Buddhist cultures like Thailand.

The importance we give to the boon khoon of parents may be traced to the Buddha's teachings on mundane Right View, the basis for understanding what's what in our lives. In the Pali texts, the Buddha says that we should believe that our father is real,

and our mother is real. Are you confused as you read this? Why did the Buddha think he had to tell us that? Isn't it obvious? Who doesn't know that we've been born into this world because we have truly existing parents?

The thing to understand here is that these words are idiomatic. What the Buddha is saying is that we need to believe that there is a special significance in the relationship between parents and children, a significance that we should acknowledge and honour. The relationship between parents and children is mysterious and profound. The Buddha teaches us that there is no heavier kamma than to kill one's mother or father. In Pali, it is called *anantariya kamma*—kamma so heinous that its terrible results cannot be avoided, no matter how sincere the perpetrator's regret might be. So whereas Angulimala could become an arahant despite having killed 999 people, it would have been impossible if he had killed just one person, if that one person had been either his mother or father.

The Buddha did not teach the profundity of this relationship merely as a skilful means to promote family values. It is a timeless truth that he discovered and then revealed for the benefit of the human race. It is an important Buddhist principle that the relationship between our parents and us is deep and profound,

and probably has been going on for many lifetimes. Hence, we should accept, respect, and care about this relationship.

We might say, in summary, that in this lifetime we are resuming 'unfinished business' with our parents. In some cases, this unresolved state of affairs may manifest in a bad way, such as when a baby is abandoned by its parents, or a child is physically or sexually abused by a parent. There are such cases, and there seem to be more everyday. But the terrible things that some parents can do to their children do not disprove this special relationship. The present lifetime is just one scene of a long drama, and we do not know what has happened in the past. As a caring society, we should of course do everything we can to protect children from abuse, to make clear how unacceptable we find it, and to deal with guilty parents according to the law of the land. But at the same time we may protect our minds from anger and despair by reminding ourselves that we are seeing one small segment of a complex saga, largely hidden from our eyes. Considering this truth, perhaps victims of abuse may be able to find their way to forgiveness for all involved.

Fortunately, there are very few parents who are completely evil to their children. Most are, as the texts say, like Brahma Gods towards them, motivated by un-

wavering love, compassion and sympathetic joy. In a number of discourses, the Buddha teaches us how to return our parents' profound beneficence. One of the best known is the teaching called The Six Directions, which the Buddha taught to a young man named Sigalaka. A part of this teaching states that:

In five ways, young householder, a child should minister to his parents as the East, (saying to himself):

i. Having been supported by them, I will support them in my turn.
ii. I will help them with their work.
iii. I will keep up the honour and the traditions of my family.
iv. I will make myself worthy of my heritage.
v. I will make offerings, dedicating merit to them after their death.

(DIII.189-192)

The teachings in this discourse reflect the ideal structure of a Buddhist society. The emphasis is on people's responsibilities towards one another, on duties rather than rights. Nowadays, it is heartening to reflect on how many people in Thailand try to practice according to the principles above. But there is another discourse that I would like to refer to here,

one that is less well known and less practiced. In this discourse the Buddha said that even if a child were to put his or her mother on one shoulder and the father on the other shoulder, carry them around for one hundred years, provide them with well-prepared food that they enjoy, bathe and massage them, allow them to excrete and urinate on their shoulder, or give them huge sums of money, provide them with a high-standing and powerful position—even if the child does all this for their parents, he or she will still be unable to adequately repay them for all they have done for their child.

However, if the parents have little or no faith in the Dhamma and if a child can help to arouse the parents' faith, or if the parents do not practice the five precepts or practice them inconsistently and if a child can help improve the parents' moral conduct, or if a child can make stingy parents delight in giving and helping others, or help parents develop the wisdom to overcome mental defilements and end suffering, the child who succeeds in these tasks can be said to have truly repaid the debt of gratitude that he owes to his parents.

There are many points to ponder in this discourse. I believe the Buddha taught it tongue in cheek. If you don't think so, just try to picture your-

self feeding your parents while they sit on your shoulders. No need to think about a hundred years, you probably wouldn't be able to take their weight for five minutes. Some mothers (I'm thinking of my own here) wouldn't want to get up there in the first place in case they fell down and broke an arm or leg. I think the Buddha used such hyperbole because he wanted us to reflect that : "Wow! Even if I was to do unbelievable things like that it wouldn't be enough, let alone what I do for them now." He wanted us to see that this is a huge debt, and no matter how hard we look after our parents in the normal ways, it is only as if we were paying back the interest on the debt. When we are in debt, the owner of the debt is not interested in how much we have paid off in the past, but how much remains to be paid in the future. Similarly, in considering our debt to our parents, rather than remembering all the things that we've done already, we should think about what remains, what we haven't done yet. The debt we owe to our parents is not an ordinary debt, it is a sacred obligation.

The Buddha teaches us that besides serving our parents as laid down in *The Six Directions,* a Buddhist should try to encourage his parents in all that is good. The child should seek to become a *kalyanamitta* or 'good friend' to his parents.

Here we may see more clearly that the idea of a Buddhist society is of one where people try to be good friends to one another. Parents should try to be good friends to their children, and children should try to be good friends to their parents. An older sibling should try to be a good friend to a younger one, and a younger sibling should try to be a good friend to an older sibling. A husband should try to be a good friend to his wife, and a wife should try to be a good friend to her husband. We should help each other in the task of reducing the negative emotions in our hearts and working together to create a life and a society based upon loving kindness, compassion, and wisdom.

In the discourse I mentioned above, the Buddha singles out four virtues. I would like to repeat them now and expand upon their meaning.

Saddha **(faith)** is the belief that the Buddha is a perfectly enlightened being, that his teachings are true, and that the Buddha's teachings will result in liberation for those who practice them seriously. It is the belief that there are people who have practiced the Buddha's teachings well and become liberated by them. It is the belief that of all the beings in the universe, this group of noble liberated beings is the most worthy of respect. It is the belief that as human

beings, we control our own fate: whether things will be good or bad, whether we experience happiness or suffering, is up to us. Our lives do not depend on any spirit, ghost, angel, god, or divine power, but depend on our own actions of body, speech, or mind—both in the past and, most importantly, in the present. Saddha means, in essence, faith in our potential for enlightenment, and the conviction that the most important thing a human should get from his/her life is freedom from suffering and its causes.

***Sila* (virtue or precepts)** is the beauty and nobility of conduct. It refers to the ability to refrain from saying or doing anything that harms oneself or others. Sila is liberation from bad kamma created through body and speech. Sila is stable when protected by an intelligent sense of shame with regard to unwholesome actions *(hiri)* and an intelligent fear of the kammic consequences of such actions *(ottappa).* Sila provides the necessary moral standard for those who are determined to grow in the Dhamma.

***Caga* (generosity, renunciation)** refers to detachment from material things, delight in generosity, charity, and helping others. People with caga are kind and caring, not stingy or self-aggrandizing.

***Paññā* (wisdom)** is the kind of knowing that extinguishes suffering and the defilements that cause it. Human beings are vulnerable to suffering at all times, even though nobody wants to suffer even the slightest amount. We suffer because we do not understand how suffering arises and how it ceases. Why don't we understand? Because we don't understand ourselves and we are not trying to understand as much as we could. As long as we don't understand ourselves we will always be a victim of our emotions. It is like being in a dark room with a cobra. Would it be possible to walk around in such a room without being bitten by the cobra? It would be hard enough to avoid bumping into the furniture.

Paññā in the initial stage works on the level of perception. It is a function of the memories that we accumulate from hearing, listening, and reading the Dhamma. We condition our emotions—both good and bad—with perception and ideation. Those who listen to and remember the Dhamma can reflect on it until they understand, and then they can cultivate the path of skilful consideration. Having trained in this way, then when the mind falls into an unwholesome state it does not become completely overwhelmed, it doesn't fall into a rut, it quickly rights itself. When someone who has never studied the Dhamma is treated badly,

for example, he will usually become angry and depressed. But one who has studied the Dhamma may bring to mind the reflection that even the Buddha himself was the subject of abuse and denigration, and so why should he be exempt from it? This thought can lead to an acceptance of the situation. By recollecting wise reflections we can start to let go of negative emotions, and start to wean ourselves away from the refuge of alcohol and pills. This level of pañña discriminates between good and bad, the beneficial and the harmful. It gives us a peaceful and realistic vision of our life and the world. But it is not an infallible refuge, especially when strong emotions have arisen.

A higher level of pañña is the wisdom that provides knowledge and understanding in the mind of those who have pure sila and stable *samadhi* (concentration). At this level, wisdom is no longer a thought. It is much faster than thoughts, like a supersonic airplane flying faster than sound. Wisdom is to clearly see all things as they are, to the point that we no longer enjoy attaching to them as *me* or *mine.* This is the wisdom that utterly penetrates the truth that everything, including our thoughts and feelings, belongs to nature and has no owner. It is the wisdom to realize that our life is not a fort in a barren land, but it is a river that flows calmly through the garden of the

world. When we develop the wisdom to see this, we can let go.

The Buddha taught that encouraging faith, virtuous conduct, generosity and wisdom in one's parents' hearts is the highest service to them, but he did not overlook the more basic kinds of service. He taught that a good child should take care of his parents. Taking care of parents starts with material items, but does not end there. Giving material gifts or providing comfort is a symbol of love, but it is not a proof of love and certainly shouldn't be a substitute for it.

The way that daughters and sons relate to their parents varies from family to family, since it depends on many factors; for example, how many children there are in the family, their age, whether they are still living at home or elsewhere, near or far away, etc. When parents get old, a good son or daughter helps to take care of them. If it is really not practical to do so (and not just a lame excuse), then they should go to visit their parents often, or at least call or write regularly, to ask after them and tell their parents about what is going on in their lives. To know that their children miss and care about them is a medicine that gives parents peace of mind, and can be a medicine more effective than those they may receive from their

doctor. We give our parents what we can give. It is wonderful if we can pay the medical bills when our parents are sick, but if we are poor and cannot afford such help then we should give what we do have—such as time. Sitting with them, reading for them, or nursing them as best we can (for example, giving them a massage, bathing them, or feeding them)—these things may be more valuable to our parents than any material gift or money.

The discourse I quoted above tells us that the greatest factor conditioning the happiness and suffering in our lives are thoughts and emotions, or in other words the mind itself. It is for this reason that the Buddha says that it is a great merit for those who can help their parents to develop wholesome qualities and experience happy joyous mental states. It is a kind of giving that enables our parents to gain a priceless gift.

It is good and feels good to give material gifts to our parents and to give them treats, to take them out for meals or to take them on holiday for example, but these kinds of gifts are always somewhat limited. Material things, in particular, can break down and fall apart and can even be a cause of such anxiety for the elderly that they become a double-edged sword. The support and care given to parents can only help them in this life time. The Buddha says that in addition to

these praiseworthy ways of showing our love and gratitude to our parents, we should not overlook their spiritual welfare. Good qualities that arise in the hearts of our parents have no drawbacks. They're not dependent on external conditions, nobody can steal them, and they provide provisions for the next life.

For this reason, the Buddha calls the inner virtues a noble treasure or noble wealth. They are noble because they are the means to attain the true nobility of complete freedom from suffering. We should provide as much happiness and comfort to our benefactors as we can, but at the same time we should not forget what lies beyond that. Mitigating the suffering our parents endure in their wandering through the samsaric realm is still inferior to reducing its root causes.

To summarize, the Buddhist principles regarding how we honour the debt of kindness we owe to our parents depends on our beliefs that:

1. Continual rebirth is painful (suffering), and freedom from the cycle of rebirth is true happiness.
2. Rebirth is conditioned by defilements (kilesa).
3. Humans can let go of defilements, and they should do so.

4. Letting go of defilements and cultivating good qualities is the practice leading to true happiness.

The question is: how can we encourage our parents to cultivate saddha, sila, caga, and pañña as the Buddha suggests? We should be prepared for some disappointment. We may not be able to do it at all, or achieve only partial results. Our "young branch" is relatively difficult to bend, why should their "old branch" be easy?[1] Don't be irritated or frustrated by your parents, and don't give up on them, or else your mind will become clouded and negative. It's normal for people to resist change. So act wisely but without expectations. Do it because it is the correct thing for a son or daughter to do, but don't allow yourself to suffer through your goodness.

It's very important to set a good example. As the old saying has it, "Actions speak louder than words," and the best method of persuasion may not be through speech. If we let our parents see the benefits we gain from practicing the Dhamma: if they see within us qualities of generosity, serenity, loving kind-

1 There is a saying in Thai "a young branch is easy to bed, an old branch is difficult to bend," meaning it is easy to teach young people and difficult to teach old people.

ness, circumspection, and persistence, then it may give them the faith and motivation to practice themselves. Simply put, if we want to help our parents, we also, at the same time, have to help ourselves.

It is probably easiest to start by helping our parents cultivate the third quality: caga, since this has always been emphasized in the Thai society. I can't imagine that there is any other country in the world where people take more delight in giving than they do here in Thailand. A good son or daughter invites parents to join them in making offerings and donations that will truly benefit Buddhism and the society at large. We should use our intelligence in choosing what to give and where. In making gifts to the *sangha,* for example, we should be aware that the *Vinaya* forbids a monk from making any requests from laypeople who are unrelated to him, except in the case that they have already offered a formal invitation *(pavarana)* for him to do so. Don't allow yourself to feel intimidated if a monk tries to solicit donations from you. He is breaking a rule in the Vinaya by doing so and you needn't fear that it will be a bad kamma not to give anything to him. On the contrary, it would be a demerit to give because you would be supporting the monk's unethical action and the undermining of the sangha. Give appropriate gifts—how much they cost is not an indi-

cator of how much merit is made—and give in such a way that you can feel joy before, during, and after the act. Few things enhance the sense of connection between family members as much as group acts of generosity.

In addition, we can set an example for our parents by living a simple life, not spending money extravagantly and not being unduly fascinated with material things. By reminding our parents in this way (definitely not by preaching to them) they may be led to consider their own attitude toward material things. We can hold up a mirror for our parents to look at themselves and by doing so we do them a service, because being free of obsession with material things is another meaning of the word caga. Some fathers see a cool, new model of car and get as excited as a teenage boy, while some mothers see some new fashionable dress, exclaim like a teenage girl. Under the influence of sudden feverish desires for consumer goods, it's quite normal these days for middle-aged people to act in ways which the wise elders of the past would have considered immature. The fact that we know when to stop, we know the right measure, may remind our parents.

In other matters, it depends on our parent's personality. If they sometimes go to a monastery and

are interested in Dhamma, it will probably be relatively easy for us to discuss meaningful issues with them every now and then. But if they are not interested in Dhamma; if they're still in good health and have never allowed themselves to think of the inevitability of death, then they may become defensive. Those who treat their kilesa like a precious thing, something that adds flavor to their lives, will feel that Dhamma is invasive and they will try to avoid or reject it. If that is the case, we have to accept it and respect their right. Don't nag them or oppress them. The Dhamma is not something you can foist on someone, even though you mean well. If our parents reject the Dhamma, then we have to let go for the time being, happy and willing to share what we can with our parents if and when they change their minds.

As for the parents who are interested in the Dhamma, we can take them to a monastery so that they can make merit, listen to Dhamma, and meditate in a tranquil place. If they still have superstitious beliefs concerning medallions, black magic, fortune telling, mediums, sorcerers, etc., then talk to them about it if you can. However, you should talk at an appropriate time and place, and don't make your parents feel that you think you know something they don't know, or you're smart and they're foolish.

Encourage them to exercise regularly: Chi Gong is a good choice since it is a type of meditation in itself. Find good Dhamma books for them to read, or play Dhamma talk cassettes or CDs for them. Talk to them about birth, aging, sickness, and death in a natural way, letting them see that these are not inauspicious subjects for conversation. Faith and wisdom grow from having the courage to confront the truths of life. It is not as if we could escape from these truths simply by ignoring them.

But it is also important to understand that the Buddha did not teach that being a good son or daughter means that we should do everything our parents tell or ask us to do. Refusing to do what they want is not always wrong. Why? Because there are some parents who tell or ask their children to do things which are inappropriate. It is not wrong to refuse parents who ask us to do something illegal or to engage in vices such as drinking alcohol or gambling. Our boon khoon obligations are not restricted to our parents. We are also children of the Buddha, and his kindness is even greater than that of our parents. Our obligation to him is consequently of the highest. Thus if our efforts to express our gratitude to parents conflicts with our commitment to goodness and truth, then the wise person, in the most tactful and respect-

ful way, takes what is right as his guide. To be a good friend to our parents does not mean to please them in every way. Without being rigid and insensitive, we have to have clear, good principles, and seek to be unbiased.

If you can find the time in the morning or evening, invite your parents to chant and meditate with you. The peace that can be experienced through meditation gives a wonderful happiness, strength, and brightness to those who reach it. People with peaceful minds often live long lives because the power of the stabilized mind can suppress the frustration, proliferation, and worries that weaken our immune system. If our parents practice meditation until they become skillful, they will have a great inner refuge when they are sick.

To be effective, meditation must be developed in conjunction with efforts to train our actions and speech. One easy way to help our parents reduce their kilesa is not to indulge in unwholesome conversation with them. If one of our parents starts gossiping about somebody in an unkind way, for example, or attacking them behind their back we can simply keep quiet. If we don't respond or join in, then our parent will soon lose pleasure in such talk and will perhaps gain some self-awareness.

Daughters and sons still living in the family home should try to be neutral in the arguments that may spring up between their parents now and then. In a stressful time, both mother and father often try to draw their children onto their own side. A good daughter or son will not let that happen, and will aim at being an impartial referee. We should try to calm angry parents down, and be careful not to say or do anything that will make the situation worse. We should help parents to resolve their differences without either side having to feel they have won or lost. We should try to listen patiently to our parents' grumbles and complaints. Listening to our parents, mediating when they quarrel, encouraging them in right speech: these are also ways that we can repay the debt of gratitude we owe our parents.

If we can be a good friend to our parents over a long period of time, they will start to trust and respect us more and more. Our influence over them and the opportunity to encourage them in goodness will likewise increase. But it takes time and we must not rush. We should observe how we also benefit from our efforts because it takes a lot of patience to treat elderly people correctly. As people get older they can often become grumpy, fussy, or forgetful. Being around them we can easily feel irritated by this, and

so we have to be mindful to sustain our inner balance. Thus, in helping them we also help ourselves.

Actually this world is a world of benefaction. Did we grow the food that we ate today? Where did it come from? Did we make the clothes we wear today? Where is the cloth from? A single piece of clothing that was made of cotton required cotton farmers, cotton harvesters, cotton weavers, tailors, designers, designers of the weaving and sewing machines, manufacturers, and sellers. If today we use a phone, watch TV, or sit in a car, we depend on the cleverness and diligence of how many people in how many countries? To appreciate the origin of what we have can calm down our mind, and make us aware of the web of relationship among people throughout the world that is invisible to the naked eye.

Not only are we in debt to our fellow human beings, we are also in debt to other living creatures. If earthworms did not eat the soil, for example, we would not be able to grow crops and without agriculture the human race could not survive. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to earthworms. And then there are the water buffaloes, cows, and other farm animals. Do we ever feel thankful to them?

Actually I am afraid that if the human race disappeared from this world, all the other creatures

would gather together and cheer so hard that they'd lose their voices. Human beings are so ungrateful: we deplete natural resources, destroy nature, and are close to making the world itself unlivable—all for our personal gain. Behind our actions lies the delusion that we are the owners of the world and have no responsibilities towards the creatures and plants that share it with us. As Buddhists we should be smarter than this, and yet most of us have unconsciously absorbed this crazy way of looking at life from the West. As a consequence we carry on with indifference. In the future we and our descendants will have to suffer from the results of this kamma we have created, and who is to blame but ourselves? It may not be too late to solve this problem now, but we have to change our attitude so that we realize the depth and breadth of the kindness and benefaction in the world. We must try to work together to reduce the power of human selfishness. And we can start with our own family.

The Buddha says that it is extremely difficult to find someone who has never been our father, mother, brother, or sister in a previous life. Therefore, when we reflect on the debt of gratitude that we owe to our parents and other family members, then please remember this teaching as well. Expand your efforts to express your gratitude to include all fellow human

beings. Train yourself to be a good friend to all those around you and to the world in which we live.

Finally, may we all live the life of a good friend. May you be a good friend to yourself by acting, speaking, and thinking only of beneficial things for yourself and others. Be a good friend to those who have helped you, especially your father and mother. Give them what you can, help them as befits someone who has helped you so much. Most importantly, through the power of the Triple Gems may our parents and all of us ever grow and prosper with the virtues of saddha, sila, caga, and pañña.

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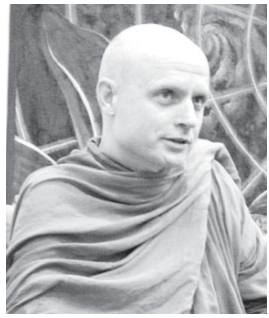

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Former name Shaun Chiverton

1958	Born in England
1978	Met Ajahn Sumedho (Pra Rajsumedhajahn, Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, England) at Hamstead Vihara, England. Spent a Rains Retreat with Ajahn Sumedho's community in England, then travelled to Thailand.
1979	Became a samanera (novice monk) at Nong Pah Pong Monastery, Ubon Rajathani Province, Thailand.
1980	Took full Bhikkhu ordination at Nong Pah Pong Monastery, with the Venerable Ajahn Chah as his preceptor.
1997 - 2001	Abbot, Wat Pah Nanachat (International Forest Monastery), Ubon Rajathani Province, Thailand.
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ASSOCIATED MONASTERIES AND CENTRES

Below are addresses of monasteries founded by
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The portal page for this community worldwide is:
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