GRATITUDE TO PARENTS

FOREWORD

In five ways one should minister to one’s parents:

- Having supported me, I shall support them.
- I shall do their duties.
- I shall keep up the honour and the traditions of my family.
- I shall make myself worthy of my heritage.
- I shall make offerings dedicating the goodness of my practice to my parents after their death.

Sigalovada Sutta: Digha Nikaya 31.

These words of the Buddha give expression in terms of observance to the feeling of loyalty and gratitude that a clear-minded person may have with regards to their parents. That this is not necessarily the case is a sad reflection on either the quality of our parents or the attitude of neglect that the society or the individual has towards these powerfully influential people. Even as adults we often respond to situations in ways that are attributable to parental influence - for good or for ill. It is an area to acknowledge and explore.

The following text is edited from a talk given by Ajahn Sumedho at Amaravati in October 1994 on a day that the Sri Lankan community had asked to have dedicated to remembering parents. It deals with cultivating the feeling that backs up the observance.

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Even if one should carry about one’s mother on one shoulder and one’s father on the other, and so doing should live a hundred years... Moreover, if one should set them up as supreme rulers, having absolute rule over the wide earth abounding in the seven treasures - not even by this could one repay one’s parents. And why! Bhikkhus, parents do a lot for their children: they bring them up, provide them with food, introduce them to the world.

Yet, bhikkhus, whoever encourages their faithless parents, and settles and establishes them in faith; or whoever encourages their immoral parents and settles and establishes them in morality, or whoever encourages their stingy parents, and settles and establishes them in generosity, or whoever encourages their foolish parents, and settles and establishes them in wisdom - such a person, in this way repays, more than repays, what is due to their parents.

Anguttara Nikaya: Twos, 32

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 kataveti, 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, generosity 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 kataveti 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 kataveti 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 skillfulness 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 kataveti.

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 [see note 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 [see note 2] - bhikkhu - that is to walk from place to place 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 kataveti 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 kataveti 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 kataveti, 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 tremendous sense of duty, of service, but not in a heavy way. kataññu 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 kataññu 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. Gripping, 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 kataññī. Do not think it is just a day to be sentimental. kataññī 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.