

The Right Angle: It's Never Wrong

By Venerable Luang Por Liam Thitadhammo

Excerpts from a talk given at Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery, California, in May 2009



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 (who are initially total strangers to us) 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 mother's wombs, all of us have a debt of gratitude owed to innumerable others – let alone 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 favour gratefully are called *katavedi*.

Kataññu-kataveditā: 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 established, 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, water 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 water 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-puggalā*: 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 towards 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 *mettā* and *karunā*, 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 *anattā*, and eventually realise the path and fruit of Nibbana. People without *kataññu* do not know the value of these adversities, and they heap disaster and peril on to 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. If all people felt this way, how could our world fail to become a heavenly realm?

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, cools the heat from the frictions of the world.

Considering 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.

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 cultivate deeper and deeper levels of spiritual awareness in their disciples' minds. This is the sign of true mettā 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 kataññu 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 honour the good name of their spiritual home and they constantly share the merit of their wholesome actions with their mother, father and teachers.

This chance we have to receive these highest gifts is as wonderful as if the Blessed One himself were offering them to us directly. 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.

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 sometimes do act unmindfully in these ways, 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 demon 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.