





# THE ZEN OF GRATITUDE

WHY IS MORE AND MORE ALWAYS BETTER IF IT CAN NEVER BE ENOUGH?  
AND OTHER GREAT QUESTIONS FROM **DAVID LOY**

“**T**he striking thing about gratitude is how much there is in our society that militates against it,” says Zen teacher David Loy. “For example, consumerism—which in some ways seems to be the prevalent religion of the modern world—is based not on cultivating gratitude, but just the opposite. “ Fortunately, says Loy, gratitude can be cultivated as a spiritual practice. He spoke with *S&H* about practices to develop gratitude, and how greed and generosity can be expressed on both the individual and institutional levels. His website is davidloy.org.

**Gratitude is often seen as a good and important quality, but also as kind of obvious and basic. Is there anything much to say about gratitude?**

Thinking about it recently, I realized that gratitude is not just something that we feel or don't feel, but that it's something that needs to be encouraged and developed in the same way as any other spiritual practice. It really transforms the way we experience the world.

Meister Eckhart, the great medieval Christian mystic, wrote: “If the only prayer we ever say is ‘thank you,’ that would be enough.” As Brother Steindl-Rast put it, we aren't grateful because we're happy or because our life is going well, we're happy because we're grateful. So gratitude also transforms how we experience ourselves.

**Why don't we talk about gratitude more?**

Well, the other striking thing about gratitude is how much there is in our society that militates against it. For example, consumerism—which in some ways seems to be the prevalent religion of the modern world—is based not on cultivating gratitude, but just the opposite. Consumerism is about cultivating dissatisfaction through advertising, and that sense of lack is what keeps us always craving something more, rather than appreciating the many things that we already have.

**Do you think focusing on gratitude could possibly distract us from thinking about difficult situations that do need our attention?**

This is a point that's sometimes made about mindfulness, how it can encourage a kind of

BY **SAM MOWE**

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self-preoccupation that withdraws our attention from the larger social and ecological challenges that we face today.

From that perspective, I think it's very important on the individual or personal level for each of us to appreciate the many things that we have going for us in our lives, but not in a way that distracts our attention from the larger systemic or institutional issues that face us right now. As activist Joanna Macy has pointed out, gratitude can help empower us to take on these challenges.

If you don't start with cultivating and living in gratitude, I think it's very hard not to be overwhelmed by the crises that we're facing today. Gratitude can provide a kind of grounding and strength that we can then use to go out and do what we can to address some of these important issues.

**You mentioned the importance of actively cultivating gratitude. Are there practices that can help with this?**

Of course there are. For example, one can make a habit of taking some time at the end of each day to remember what's happened and being grateful for something that made one happy. Another is to list and reflect on 10 things within one's own life that one feels grateful for right now.

Meditation teacher James Baraz tells a wonderful story about visiting his aging mother who was rather negative and critical. I think we might call her a "glass half empty" person. He gently suggested to her that she do this exercise of writing down 10 things that she was grateful for, and, as he tells the story, it was extraordinarily transformative for her.

**These practices sound like they're performed in private. Do you think gratitude can also be cultivated by expressing it to others?**

Yes, indeed! That includes things like simply saying, "Thank you," and letting people know that they're appreciated. This is really huge in our society because we have a collective epidemic of low self-esteem. People often don't feel appreciated enough and aren't recognized enough for what they do. When we develop the habit of expressing our gratitude, it can really make a difference in other people's lives, not just in our own.

I think that goes along with a fundamental principle in Buddhism that we might call "basic friendliness." Sometimes the Pali term *metta* is translated as love and kindness, but that's a little extreme insofar as I understand the etymology. *Metta* is more like an attitude of basic friendliness with which we should approach the world and respond to people. Of course, sometimes there are situations where we need to be more careful, but those tend to be rare. Most of the time, people respond to us in the way that we relate to them. Gratitude is an important part of this attitude.

The other aspect of gratitude that needs to be emphasized is the deeper way in which we express it, which is generosity. When we realize all that we have been given—how



much there is to appreciate in our lives—we see that gratitude is not something to be cherished in the sense of keeping it to ourselves, but something that is to be shared with other people.

**When I think of generosity in a Buddhist context, it's not that we're generous because it's the right thing to do but rather because it's the natural thing to do when we realize our deep interconnection with others.**

I think that's exactly right. My own Zen teacher, Yamada Koun, emphasized that a genuine awakening is spontaneously accompanied by a sense of compassion. We could certainly include in that compassion a sense of sharing that goes beyond the kind of exchange-economy focus that we have now, to an approach that doesn't think only in terms of "I'll give you this if you give me that."

If generosity is the natural expression of understanding our mutual interconnectedness, then I suppose greed is a sign of an unenlightened person.

It's the sign of someone who thinks that their own well-being is separate from that of other people. The Buddha identified three poisons—sometimes called the "three roots of evil" or "three unwholesome motivations"—which are greed, ill will, and delusion. Today, however, it's important to understand that these don't exist only on the individual level, because the modern world has institutionalized them. In particular, greed has been institutionalized as an economic system where people never consume enough, corporations are never profitable enough, their market share is never big enough, and our national GDP isn't big enough.



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That makes me wonder: Why is more and more always better if it can never be enough? We have a very strange, unstable economic system in that if it doesn't expand, it tends to collapse.

**That's an interesting observation. So what would institutional generosity or gratitude look like?**

A national health care system, like you find in other developed nation states, would be a good way for a society to express its generosity to everyone who forms a part of it. And maybe even something like a guaranteed national income. I forget what the precise term for that is, but the idea is that basically everyone would receive a certain minimum income, regardless of their economic situation, enough support to keep them from being homeless and hungry.

Ironically, given the incredible economic growth over the last few decades, the levels of poverty and the increasing gap between the rich and the poor in this country have become more and more problematic. A truly generous society would be one that wouldn't just let that happen. It would incorporate correctives into its policy-making.

Just as our economic system institutionalizes greed, I think our media institutionalizes delusion in the sense that it's not really concerned about educating or informing us

about the important things that are happening in the world. The media are more interested in finding ways to grab our eyeballs and sell them to the highest bidder. The major media outlets are mega-corporations that make money from advertising, and therefore built into their message is the presumption that consumer capitalism is natural and not something that should be or can be challenged.

**So what's the best way to promote the kind of systemic change we need? Does it start with people cultivating more positive qualities—generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom—on the individual level?**

Personal transformation is certainly where Buddhism starts. Today we can see that's necessary but not sufficient. Given the way Buddhism developed in Asia—within autocratic authoritarian societies whose rulers could and sometimes did repress Buddhism if they weren't happy with what Buddhists were doing—it's not surprising that Buddhism really didn't develop much emphasis on social justice. Instead, it focused on one's individual karma, one's personal *dukkha* (suffering), and one's own delusion. But now that Buddhism has come to the modern world, we're well situated to ask these broader questions about what might be called "institutionalized" or "structural suffering," and to start finding ways to alleviate it.

Consider climate change, for example. Bill McKibben has suggested that, yes, you and I and all of us need to do

## WHETHER LIFE IS HALF FULL OR HALF EMPTY MAKES A HUGE DIFFERENCE

In one classic study of the power of gratitude by UC Davis psychologist Robert Emmons, 16 transplant patients were divided into two groups. Both groups recorded their feelings about life and the coming day, their connections to others, and side effects they were feeling from medication. One group was also asked to add a daily list of five things or people they were grateful for, and why. After 21 days, those who kept gratitude journals had improved scores for mental health and general well-being. Meanwhile, both measures declined for those who kept the "routine" journals.

everything we can to reduce our own carbon footprint. That's where we need to start—but if the notion is that such individual effort is sufficient, that's just not going to work. We have very powerful fossil fuel corporations whose power and wealth depends upon continued exploitation of the fossil fuels that they have access to, and they are working very hard to make sure that we will not be changing to an economy run on renewable energy anytime soon. McKibben wrote that even if 10 or 12 percent of us did everything we could to reduce our carbon footprint, that wouldn't be enough. But if a smaller percentage of us also became politically involved, socially engaged, that could make all the difference.

Of course, Buddhist teachings don't give us specifics about what to do. For example, I tend to support such things as direct action and civil disobedience, but a good friend of mine is working with the Citizens' Climate Lobby to promote a carbon tax. He goes regularly to Washington to lobby Congress. Who's to say which of those is the correct way to fight climate change? My guess is that it's both—and other approaches are needed, too. Buddhism originated and developed in very different social and economic contexts, so it doesn't give us specific answers about how to address these structural problems.

**These institutional challenges require us to work with other people and form real communities.**

Right. It's not as if an ecological crisis is something that you or I can individually solve. That reemphasizes the importance of joining together and working together in ways that our society discourages. The emphasis on consumerism tends to individuate us and fosters a certain kind of passivity. The whole point of the climate-change challenge is that it's only by reconnecting and rebuilding communities that we can realistically expect to bring about the kind of changes that are necessary.

**A lot of Buddhist practice emphasizes detachment. Do you think Buddhism can help us build these kinds of necessary communities?**

For most of us, when we first come to Buddhist practice, it's because there's something wrong with our lives, such as an addiction or maybe just some vague existential angst. There's usually some suffering that brings us to the practice, and more often than not that suffering is connected with some kind of "cleaning out" that needs to happen.

So, early in one's meditation practice, there's necessarily a lot of emphasis on letting go of some problematic things that we're identifying with. But that alone is one-sided. Although it's often necessary in the early days, it's incomplete. As the *Heart Sutra* puts it, it's not only that *form is*



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*empty*, but that *emptiness is form*. This means that a letting-go that involves dissociating or disconnecting from worldly concerns ultimately works against the kind of deeper transformation that we're working toward.

The kind of transformation that occurs when we engage in wholehearted practice tends to lessen our sense of separation from the world. One's sense of separation—that I'm separate from you and the rest of the world, so my well-being is separate from yours—is the fundamental delusion that needs to be overcome. Nisaragadatta said it really well: "When I look inside and see that I am nothing, that's wisdom. When I look inside and see that I am everything, that's love. Between these two my life turns." I love that, because it shows the connection between wisdom and compassion. When we feel a deeper connection with other people and the world, then naturally there's going to be compassion and concern and wanting to live in a different kind of a way. When this happens, the meaning of my life changes. Instead of thinking "What's in this for me?" we find ourselves asking "What can I do to make this situation better for everyone?"

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