

A Life of Gratitude

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Editor's Note: The Institute of Buddhist Studies would like to express its gratitude to Richard T. Schellhase for his years of assisting us in our development as a seminary and graduate school.

My first word to you must be *arigato*. Or maybe *sumimasen*.

This "thank you" is not only to you here today who give me the opportunity to express what I have in my heart and on my mind, but also through you to all the members and friends of the Buddhist Churches of America. The BCA has put an *on* on me, for which I am grateful.

Some of you know that I am a Christian minister who has been serving for the past ten years as Director of Development for the BCA Endowment Foundation. Some of my friends and some of you may consider this relationship strange, an anomaly, even an oxymoron. The question is rightly raised, "Why would a Christian minister work for the advancement of Buddhism?"

The answer to that question will appear as this homily unfolds. In a sentence it is this: I have long been captured by a broad ecumenical vision which seeks to be inclusive of and instructed by other perceptions of Reality, and I am persuaded that a person's religious life will be deepened and enlarged through contact with other belief systems and traditions. There is no little truth to the statement "to know one religion is to know none."

Without any hesitation or equivocation, I want to report that I think (at least I hope) that I am a better Christian because of the experiences of Buddhism gained through my association with so many fine people within the BCA community. I intend this statement to be the

highest possible compliment I could imagine. My personal understanding of beauty and truth and of life and death, and my Christian perspective on these realities, have been immeasurably enlarged and enhanced by the privilege you have afforded me to live in your midst and to learn from you of the Buddha-Dharma. Again, *arigato*. Thank you.

MUTUAL OPENNESS AND UNDERSTANDING

I stand here as a sign (even though a feeble, inchoate and even tarnished and cloudy sign) of what I believe to be a moral imperative for the whole human family; that is, the willingness to understand each other's religious convictions and to allow them to interpenetrate our own belief systems so that the specific and very personal religious views of all of us may be strengthened and deepened.

Religious confrontation and aggressive activity aimed at converting each other are no longer tolerable within the global family. They must give way to acceptance, understanding and cooperation. While maintaining our own particular religious identity and vitality, we need to learn to live *with* each other and to learn *from* each other in order to be better practitioners of our own respective religious heritage, and in order to fashion a more just, humane and harmonious world.

Ideology must give way to openness and mutual enrichment. We may not see eye to eye, but we live side by side, and as we rub elbows with each other we must be vigilant in restraining ourselves from jabbing or puncturing our neighbors' sacred beliefs. It is irresponsible to dismiss other experiences or expressions of Reality with disdain, contempt or intolerance, or even indifference.

This city, Chicago, exactly one hundred years ago, under the auspices of the Columbian Exposition, was host to the World's Parliament of Religions, where for the first time in history representatives from virtually all known living religions gathered to present their respective faiths with a readiness to learn from each other. This remarkable Congress of religious leaders was a harbinger of the spirit of mutual acceptance which I feel is today a necessity and not simply a courtesy.

In the Rigveda, India's oldest collection of sacred writings, we read, "Reality is one, though the wise speak of it variously." I interpret that to mean, in part, that Reality is multi-faceted and that persons in different places at different times perceive Reality differently. That just seems to me to be common sense. We are all different, and we perceive Reality differently.

Let me use a simple illustration. I can't ever imagine what it would have been like to have grown up in Egypt 5,000 years ago, or to have been a Russian serf under Catherine the Great in the 18th cen-

tury, or an Italian immigrant living in New York City a hundred years ago. I can't even begin to know what it was like to live in China 1,000 years ago or even during the more recent Communist revolution. I have no idea what it is like today to grow up in Harlem, Somalia or Bosnia. I don't even know what it's like today to grow up on a farm in Lancaster, Pennsylvania in an Amish family, without electricity, and whose only means of transportation is a horse and buggy. Even though I now live among these people, I can't possibly enter into their lives. I shall always remain outside their culture.

My point is this: There are not only subtle differences within the human family, but there are in fact vast differences among people, cultures and eras. And these differences color our perception of Reality. In his *An Interpretation of Religion*, John Hick has said: "Every religion arises from within [its own] complex cultural structure on which it feeds and to which in turn it contributes."

Religion, I believe, is the human response to Reality. It is the way we make sense of what is, the way we provide meaning for our lives. It is the structure of meaning, the philosophical house, where we feel at home.

It is no great intellectual leap to see that vastly different people growing up in vastly different ages in vastly different cultures develop vastly different religious dwellings.

What we have that is similar, even identical, is the earth, the universe, and our common humanity. We are all thinking, feeling persons living in one and the same physical world.

Given the variegated life and experiences of countless generations of men and women, it should not be surprising to see so many different religious traditions, so many different ways of perceiving Reality and seeking to make sense of life.

REALITY: A COMPASSIONATE EMBRACE

It is now time to turn our attention to our respective responses to reality: the Jodo Shinshu and the Christian. I don't want either to deny or to minimize the differences, but I am more interested in emphasizing some striking similarities. Keep in mind the purpose of this exercise: to strengthen our own faith by looking at each other's beliefs.

The first point of contact between these religions is this: They both see ultimate Reality as good and they both perceive ultimate Reality as embracing us compassionately.

The great physicist Albert Einstein once remarked that the most important religious question we can ask is this: "Is the universe friendly?" Both Shin Buddhism and Christianity answer that question in the affirmative.

For Jodo Shinshu, the Primal Vow is the primordial base, the spring from which flows the understanding of Amida as all-embracing, all-encompassing, never-forsaking compassion, the truthful and fruitful saving activity of Reality. As a Christian, when I say "God is love" I mean something similar, namely that at bottom, at the root of Reality, at the center of all, is a friendly face or force, a hug that holds us and accepts us as we are.

For you, the symbol of Amida's embracing, awakening and saving compassionate activity is the standing statue of the Buddha-figure leaning slightly forward, actively coming toward you. For Christians, the symbol is the cross, a sign to us of incarnate compassionate suffering love. Both of these symbols convey the cosmic dimension of compassion to their respective believers.

Since for some years I have held the conviction that both Shin Buddhism and Christianity share a common perception that ultimate Reality embraces us like a loving parent, you can imagine my satisfaction in reading recently the following statement by a Shin Buddhist scholar. John S. Yokota (whose name was Ishihara before he took the name of his parents-in-law) wrote this in an essay published in a Japanese religious journal, "The symbols Christ and Amida are the designations of the active and grace-filled activity of Reality that above all makes clear that Reality is Reality-for-us. This Reality-for-us is saving power, that primordial activity which makes Reality so intimately tied up with our destiny."

One of my teachers in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, was John Noss, a professor of philosophy and religion at our church-related college and seminary located there. He was born in Japan and had become an internationally acclaimed scholar of world religions. For thirty years his book, *Man's Religions* (later entitled *Living Religions*) was the most popular textbook in the country for university courses in comparative religion.

In his account of Buddhism, he writes, "In Mahayana Buddhism the Absolute Essence or Suchness is identified with a sort of Love-behind-things that produces Buddhas—a Buddha-essence at the heart of the universe. Christian theology and Buddhist metaphysics here share something of a common ground." In both Pure Land and Christian teachings, Noss sees expressed a kind of cosmic optimism, a sense of the goodness and grace that Reality seems to reveal about itself and of the limitless possibilities open to those who respond to this Reality.

Buddhists and Christians concur, I believe, in conceiving of life as clothed with and enclosed within a Compassionate Reality, and we both seek continuously to become more aware of and responsive to this astonishing courtesy by which we are clasped and in which we are enfolded.

One Source, One Sway
One Life enfolding us
In Love always.

A PERSONAL PARENTHESIS

Before proceeding further, perhaps a personal addendum might be helpful. What I am saying about Jodo Shinshu is a distortion. I don't mean it to be. I don't intend to misrepresent your religion, but I see Buddhism from a western slant, from a Christian perspective filtered by a different culture and tradition, and that stance necessarily obscures and colors what I see.

We are all saddled with a similar situation, namely the obvious inability to remove ourselves from our cultural, historical and existential circumstances. But not to worry! As long as we honestly intend to see each other's religions sympathetically and appreciatively, then let us not fear to open ourselves to the lessons we may learn from each other and from each other's traditions, even from our distortions of the other's beliefs.

The result of this openness to each other will be the interpenetration of our respective traditions, beliefs and practices. And this will change us, and we shall grow. Perhaps I should only speak for myself, so let me simply say that learning of Amida has (as I mentioned) deepened and enlarged my understanding of Christ. In saying this I hope not to trivialize, minimize, qualify or objectify the person or power of either Amida or Christ. They are what they are regardless of what I say or how I relate to them. But from my very limited, sinful and ignorant perspective, I see Christ more clearly since Amida Buddha has come into my line of vision and my frame of reference.

Just as I do not need to hate all other women to prove that I love my wife, so I need not reject Amida to accept Christ. In fact, my insight into Reality provided by Buddhism has not diminished but has embellished my Christian religious convictions.

THE ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

Now I turn to another aspect of our religions which we seem to share and the understanding of which may deepen through interpretation and subsequent interpenetration.

My first point has been that Shin Buddhism and Christianity agree that we are accepted and warmly welcomed by the Reality that is, by the Suchness of our existential situation. In some way by some means Another Power saves us from submerging into the slough of delusion, ignorance and blind passion.

My second point centers on the reaction we have from this perception of salvation by Other Power. Having been embraced unconditionally, Buddhists and Christians both shout "Hooray!" In a word, I am speaking of gratitude, the grateful response to the graceful and gracious activity of Amida and Christ.

In three weeks I shall retire after more than forty-five years as an ordained minister. In anticipation of this, I began thinking—perhaps six or seven months ago—of what I would like to say "If I Had Only One Sermon to Preach." Indeed, *this is* the last sermon I will preach before retirement. I had no idea six months ago that my last sermon as a Christian minister would be preached in a Buddhist Temple, but I did determine then that my last *hurrah* would be a *hooray*!

If I had only one sermon to preach, it would be on gratitude. There is no more important subject. In my view, the attitude of gratitude is the primary posture for religious persons.

By "attitude" I don't mean simply a mood or a status. It is not something static. The attitude of gratitude is an activity, a positive force. We defined religion as a response to Reality. Now we may add a further word and say that for Buddhists and Christians the spontaneous reaction to Reality is a grateful response.

GRATITUDE IN SHINSHU

When we talk of Amida or the Dharma, or Reality and Truth; when we talk of the Pure Land, Nirvana and Enlightenment; when we speak of Other Power, the Nembutsu, and the Buddha-Dharma; when we speak of these things we are talking of values and realities not easily grasped or defined. But gratitude! That is something we all experience and express. We all know something about gratitude. While not easily practiced, it is nevertheless within our ability to comprehend.

For both Shin and Christian believers, gratitude is the foundational attitude toward Reality and the fundamental activity in life as we are called to live it. Let us look at Shinshu first. Please remember that I may unintentionally distort what you mean by gratitude. But this is what I've absorbed and assimilated into my western-born bones from my association with you, from my reading of your sacred literature, and from other persons who have sought to interpret your religion.

As far as I can discern, the entire life and practice of a Jodo Shinshu believer is, ideally, lived in an attitude of gratitude.

Even a cursory reading of the *Seiten* reveals gratitude as the dominant note in Shinshu practice. In their introduction to "The Teaching, Practice, Faith, and Enlightenment," the editors wrote: "We know that Shinran's motive in writing the *Kyo Gyo Shin Sho* rose from his feeling of gratitude to the Buddha and the Seven Patriarchs." In the

preface of that same small treatise, Shinran wrote, "I express joy over what I have heard and praise what I have received."

Note that joy is the constant companion of gratitude, that praise is one way to express gratitude, and that the sense of indebtedness precedes the feeling of gratitude. Hear Shinran's voice again:

What a joy it is to place my mind in the soil of Buddha's Universal Vow, and to let my thoughts float on the sea of the Inconceivable Dharma. I deeply acknowledge the Tathagata's Compassion, and I sincerely appreciate the Master's Benevolence. As my joy increases, my feeling of indebtedness grows deeper.

In the Gatha of True Faith, we read, "Uttering only the Tathagata's Name always, we should express our gratitude for the Great Compassionate vow." In their commentary on the contents of the *Seiten*, the editors wrote:

The Utterance of the Name is called an act of gratitude from the standpoint of sentient beings. The Utterance of the Name is not for the purpose of gaining merits; it can only be an act of gratitude in response to one's salvation. Hence, Faith becomes the right cause and the Utterance of the Name becomes an act of gratitude. The practice is none other than the practice of gratitude.

In Zendo's *Kannen-bomon* we read "I reverently address all those who desire to be born in the Pure Land: If you hear the Teachings, you should in response to this voice grieve and shed tears like rain. And for kalpas and kalpas—piled up and linked together—you should crush your bodies and break your bones to return in gratitude the Buddha's compassion."

Based on this passage, Shinran wrote his familiar wasan:

The benevolence of Amida's great compassion,
Even if we must crush our bodies, should be returned in
gratitude.
The benevolence of the masters and teachers,
Even if we must break our bones, should be returned in
gratitude.

In one of his letters, Rennyo wrote, "As long as we have life in us, we should say the Nembutsu thinking of it as a response of thankfulness."

Moving to more contemporary interpreters of the Nembutsu as a life of gratitude, let us listen to some wise words from the late Rever-

end Yoshitaka Tamai, minister at the Tri-State Buddhist Temples for over fifty years. These passages were culled from his last book, entitled *Ichinyo*. Some of these statements were first addressed to persons interned in relocation camps during World War II. Listen to his wisdom:

It is the purpose of the Buddha-Dharma to teach people to move from ingratitude to knowing your indebtedness, and from knowing your indebtedness to repaying your indebtedness.

A life worth living is not a life of self-benefit and satisfying egoistic desires, but rather awareness of our indebtedness and gratitude for it.

I believe the biggest defect in American democracy is that there is no feeling of gratitude toward others, and this is what the Buddha-Dharma has to teach the people of the United States.

Unfortunately, our present generation places too much emphasis on individual rights and not enough on our indebtedness to others. . . . If we can come to truly appreciate and realize the infinite amount of our indebtedness, everything will be embraced in the light of gratitude.

The mind that has forgotten gratitude will never give birth to *shinjin*, the mind of faith.

These reflections remind us again of Shinran Shonin's comment, "Only when we enter into the wisdom of *shinjin* do we become aware of our indebtedness to the Buddha;" and of the opening passage of one of his Wasan:

While reciting Amida's name those with *shinjin*

Never forget their indebtedness to the Buddha.

This over-powering sense of indebtedness has been one of Buddhism's major contributions to Japanese culture. I recall some years ago reading Ruth Benedict's classic, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, a study commissioned by the Office of War Information to help the United States government better understand Japanese culture. Dr. Benedict makes this profound distinction: in Western nations people speak of being "*heirs of the ages*," but in Eastern countries—in Japan—the coin is turned to the other side, and they speak of being "*debtors to the ages*."

What an indictment of western civilization, where we selfishly seize our patrimony, thinking of ourselves as rightful "*heirs*;" while in contrast eastern peoples tend in humility to remember that they are undeserving recipients and therefore view themselves as "*debtors*."

Alfred Bloom reinforces the prominence of gratitude in the Teachings. He writes, in *Shinran's Gospel of Grace* "The emphasis on gratitude became a distinctive characteristic of the Shinshu view of life," and for Shinran, "religious activity is the expression of gratitude to Amida Buddha;" "the meaning of life consists in one's gracious response to Amida Buddha's compassion," and naming the name, utterance and the Nembutsu are all "signs of gratitude."

In his *Strategies for Modern Living*, an explication of the *Tannisho*, Bloom writes that "reliance on Other Power means a life of thankfulness which recognizes that in all areas of our lives we are more receivers than givers," and that "all actions are to be considered as expressions of gratitude for the compassion that we have received."

As T. Hirose has instructed us: "Salvation is always experienced as transcendent gratitude. And gratitude spontaneously manifests itself as compassion." Bishop Seigen Yamaoka has written extensively on the Nembutsu of Gratitude and has identified gratitude as one of "The Six Aspects of Jodo Shinshu." In the booklet of that title, he writes of the name and the utterance as "an expression of gratitude," and that "this life of gratitude produces a sense of responsibility."

In other words, gratitude lies at the base of morality. It is the well from which all right actions spring and flow. When gratitude is our attitude, we will find it to be the oil that lubricates our relationships: our interaction with nature, the whole human family and all other sentient beings.

When we walk through the world wearing gratitude as a garment, we will find life more comfortable for ourselves, and we will help, thereby, to make it more hospitable for others.

One final comment on my perception of Shin Buddhism's understanding of gratitude.

We are so *bonno* and *bombu* that we can no more generate gratitude than we can create compassion. Not only the Compassionate Embrace of Amida is the working of the Other Power, but our grateful response to that activity is also a result of the Other Power. The source and the substance of gratitude is in, with and under the Nembutsu.

Taitetsu Unno, a BCA minister and a Shin scholar teaching at Smith College, says it clearly, "Our ability to be grateful is a manifestation of Amida's working in each of us. The source of gratitude [is] deeply rooted in the working of Amida's Primal Vow."

Everything is a product of and a gift from Amida. The Vow, the Name, the Utterance, the Nembutsu, and especially the practice of gratitude, are all gifts. All is Other Power, Amida working in us and for us and through us.

We can, therefore, take no credit for our salvation, or even for our expression of gratitude for such an Eternal Embrace. A quatrain

from Daiei Kaneko uses three historic figures—Genshin, Hōnen and Shinran—to illustrate this point:

Genshin, with a deep feeling of gratitude
bowed his head. Hōnen naturally and
spontaneously lowered his head. Shinran
was humbled and could not lift up his head.

A SMALL HOLE IN THE EVENING

One of the vivid memories of my ten years with you is that I never sat down at table whether in a restaurant or in a home without your observing an initial *gassho* before eating. Invariably there is that hesitation, that hint of gratitude, when faced with the hospitality of Reality. More than a tip of the hat or a nod of the head, it is the heart acknowledging debt before indulging. It is the pause before Reality that truly refreshes.

The week after Thanksgiving, several years ago, a revealing article appeared in *The New Yorker*, that most secular, sophisticated and often snobbish magazine. It was the lead article under the regular section entitled "The Talk of the Town." The author reported having cooked a huge Thanksgiving meal in his uptown (and probably up-scale) Manhattan apartment. He described the nine diners, including his wife and daughter, and how for the previous five years fixing this meal was his particular pleasure. This was "the best ever" he wrote. Just reading his description of the food he had prepared made my mouth water.

After talking about his family and guests in the living room and his work in the kitchen, and the meal almost ready to be served, he says, "I sit in my kitchen on the day of abundance feeling a lack of something." Then he ruminates about this "lack." First, he identifies it as a "lack of reverence." Then he relates it to eating and makes this amazing confession:

"The lack of a table grace
at my friends' dinner parties and my own
leaves a small hole in the evening,
the kind of hole you'd feel
if the host failed to welcome the guests.
The wild rice dressing, the gorgeous bird, the yams—
do I really intend to take all the credit for this?
A dinner this good requires a half-minute's graceful
pause."

"A small hole in the evening." I've never felt like that when I've eaten with you. It is the pause before Reality that really and truly re-

freshes!

GRATITUDE IN CHRISTIAN PRACTICE

We turn now to look at the Christian concept of gratitude, which, surprisingly, seems to have close points of contact with the Shin view as I have just explicated it.

As you know, the Bible is our basic source-book, and half of it (the Old Testament) we inherited from the Hebrews. The biggest book in the Old Testament is the section entitled "Psalms." It is really a collection of hymns which were (and still are) sung and recited by the Jews during services in their temples and synagogues. Joy, praise and thanksgiving are the basic notes sounded in the Psalms, and these grew out of their feeling of gratitude for the compassionate Reality by which they felt accepted, surrounded and saved. The last song, Psalm 150, is the grand finale of this hymn book. The writer is so happy and so grateful for the grace-filled Reality which the community has experienced that he invents a whole symphony orchestra to help the people express their thanks. He encourages participants to praise with trumpets, harps and lyres. With drums, strings and flutes. With cymbals (and to underscore his ecstatic intensity) he adds, "Praise with loud-clashing cymbals."

Finally, exploding in a violent spasm of high fever and fervor, the psalmist shouts, "Let everything that breathes praise!"

That's gratitude that has almost gotten out of hand!

The second half of the Bible is the Christian half, the New Testament. I'll quote only one sentence to illustrate how important and pervasive gratitude is to the authors of these writings. Paul, an early Christian patriarch, wrote scores of letters to friends and churches; we still have a record of a dozen or so of them. The sounds of joy and gratitude ring through all his epistles; he is forever giving thanks. His attitude of gratitude is summed up and epitomized in four words in one letter to the Thessalonians (II Thess. 5:18) where he says, "In everything give thanks." (An echo or mirror of the psalmist I just quoted!)

What Paul is suggesting is that he has experienced the deepest Reality as coming to him as a good and benevolent force. He felt warmly embraced, as by a loving, supportive and sympathetic parent. Finding himself so surrounded and so accepted, his response was an immediate, spontaneous, and life-long litany of thanks. And in his letters he expressed the hope that other persons could share that same experience of acceptance, joy and gratitude.

The Roman Catholic Church was the dominant branch of Christianity in Europe until the Protestant Reformation. As a German, I come from what was called the Reformed Church. To instruct persons properly in that branch of Christendom, a German Prince asked two

young ministers in the city of Heidelberg to draw up a catechism, a simple question and answer textbook for children. This textbook was first published in 1563. Four hundred years later, it is still used, and when I was a boy I had to go to a class once a week for two years to study this book before I could be admitted as a member of the church.

My father was the minister who led me through those 232 questions and answers. For our purposes this morning, it is interesting to note the second question, which is this: "How many things is it necessary for you to know to live and die happy?" The answer is this: "Three: first, the greatness of my sin and misery; second, how I am saved from all my sins and misery; third, how I am to be thankful for such salvation."

The whole textbook was divided into these three sections, and it may astonish you to learn that the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer were placed in the final section, entitled "On How I Am To Be Thankful."

In other words, behavior or morality is thought of as a sign of gratitude, and prayer is primarily a paean of praise. To the question "Why must we do good works?" the answer is "That with our whole life we may show ourselves thankful." And prayer is called "the chief part of thankfulness." All that we are, all that we do, our whole life, is supposed to be an expression of gratitude. I really believe that. I only wish I could live that way.

To illustrate how dominant this note of gratitude is and to make clear that Christians believe that they can do nothing to earn, merit or effect salvation, and to emphasize that a life of gratitude is the only response we can make in the face of a grace-filled Reality, I want to quote a few passages culled from five or six books written by Karl Barth, who lived in Switzerland and who some people feel was the greatest interpreter of Christianity in this century. In his *Church Dogmatics* he writes:

To believe in Jesus Christ means to be grateful.

All that we can do is to be grateful.

The response to God's revelation can be nothing than works of gratitude.

The total life-act is to be performed in gratitude.

In every self-understanding in which persons try to understand their being as a Christian otherwise than as the fulfillment of thankfulness, they misunderstand themselves as Christians.

Gratitude is to be understood not only as a quality and an activity but as the very being and essence of a person. The person is not merely grateful. The person is itself gratitude. A person can see himself or herself only as gratitude because in fact a person can

only exist as pure gratitude.

Gratitude is the response to a kindness which itself cannot be repeated or returned, which therefore can only be recognized and confirmed as such by an answer that corresponds to it and reflects it. Gratitude is the establishment of this correspondence.

Grace evokes gratitude like the voice an echo. Gratitude follows grace like thunder lightning.

Radically and basically all sin is simply ingratitude.

These quotations are from one of the most profound contemporary interpreters of our religion. And now I'll let you in on a little secret: I think he learned something about the meaning of gratitude from Shinran. In the first book of a seventeen-volume series, he has an extensive section about Shinran and Jodo-Shinshu. Let me quote Barth again:

As Shinran saw it, everything depends on the faith of the heart. We are too firmly embedded in fleshly lusts to be able to extricate ourselves from the vicious circle of life and death by any form of self-activation. All that we can do is simply to give thanks for the redemption assured by Amida without any activity at all on our part. In the Jodo-Shu doctrine the hour of death loses its emphatic and critical character, and calling on Amida loses the last remnant of the character of an achievement or a magical act. It becomes simply a sign of our thankfulness.

So we have come full circle: from Shinran and Shinshu to Barth and Christianity, and back to Shinran. Gratitude as the primary response to Reality is at the heart of both religions.

Another intellectual giant from my German Reformed tradition was Reinhold Niebuhr, a professor for thirty years at a theological school in New York City. Toward the end of his career, *The Saturday Review* asked him to write an article on "Some Things I Have Learned." Here are two sentences from that article. "At home the emphasis expressed in family worship and in instruction was on gratitude for the blessings of life. . . . I learned that gratitude is the natural response of a life lived in faith as trust in the goodness of life."

In summary of these quotations on gratitude, I cite a line from the greatest teacher I have ever had, John Baillie, of the University of Edinburgh. He is cogent in his analysis and so simple in his explanation that I continue to read and re-read his books. Recently, I came upon this sentence, which sums up his philosophy of life.

There is nothing of which I am more persuaded than that the right attitude to life is that of the person whose whole comportment

and activity have their root in the sentiment of gratitude.

Dr. Baillie wrote that over forty years ago, but just last month I read in an interview with the most recent recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, the poet Derek Walcott, a native of St. Lucia in the West Indies, a statement that epitomizes this sentiment. In the interview, Walcott was responding to a question about his book-length, Greek-style epic poem entitled "Omeros." Here is what he said about it:

The book had already been written in the mouths of the Caribbean tribe. And I felt that I had been chosen, somehow to give it voice. So the utterance was inevitable. In a sense I saw it as a long thank-you note.

It appears as though we are all called to live out our lives as one long thank-you note.

GRATITUDE: A REASONABLE RESPONSE TO REALITY

A clear consensus has emerged among religious persons and a pervasive consciousness seems to course through most of humanity that gratitude is a reasonable response to the Reality that enfolds and encompasses us.

Gratitude is accepted as such a normal and healthy reflex that ingratitude is often viewed as flowing from a sick, depraved or demented personality. Ingratitude is unhealthy and abnormal, if not immoral and irreligious.

Shakespeare of course is the preeminent literary genius of western civilization. His plays deal with the values, aspirations, emotions and behavior common to all. And I was not surprised to learn—after some basic research that I conducted—how often he touched on the subject of gratitude, and its negative corollary, ingratitude.

What is most important to discern in his plays is the way the words and emotions transcend the characters and the settings in which they speak. The strength and beauty of Shakespeare lie in the fact that the words on the stage have a dimension of truth and power far beyond the particular plot of the play. For example, as we hear King Lear rage against the ingratitude of Cordelia, his daughter, our own ingratitude toward ultimate Reality, which we experience here and now as life, is exposed.

When Shakespeare has Lear rant about the "monster ingratitude," the "dues of gratitude," of "sharp-toothed unkindness," of "ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend"—when he has Lear shout, Oh

"How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child"—the playwright is revealing *our* lack of gratitude for the benevolent cosmic totality that surrounds *us*. He is trying to make us aware of and grateful for the force in the universe that seeks to transform, renew and deepen life.

Shakespeare addresses a universal condition, the terrible sense of alienation in which we all live separated from the true self and from the true structure of Reality. He perceives Reality as fundamentally good, and when persons become aware of being within this warm embrace they are freed to envision the possibility of a radically better state of being and are then enabled to live in harmony with that Reality.

His plays not only reveal the fundamental human condition, but they also point us (the audience/the reader) to the means of transformation. *King Lear* teaches us that we are liberated by accepting gratefully the Reality by which we are embraced. Shakespeare uses this drama to illuminate and confirm the truth that gratitude is the attitude of response which best corresponds and conforms to Reality, to one's true nature, and which thereby leads to noble, joyful and enlightened living.

If we listen carefully to the words of the Bard of Stratford, perhaps we can hear the voice at the deepest level of life speaking to us. Listen:

"We have all Great cause to give great thanks."

"Not proud you have, but thankful that you have."

"The thanks I give is telling you that I am poor of thanks."

"Beggar that I am, I am even poor in thanks; but I thank you."

And two passages from *Twelfth Night*. First, Viola:

"I hate ingratitude more in humanity
than lying, vainness, babbling drunkenness,
Or any taint of vice whose strong corruption
Inhabits our frail blood."

The best passage I've saved for the last. Here is Shakespeare's response to Reality in the words of Sebastian:

"I can no other answer make but thanks,
and thanks,
and ever thanks."

In these passages Shakespeare is speaking to us and to all humanity about our indifference, insensitivity and ingratitude in the face of an all-embracing, benevolent and life-providing Reality.

Can we not agree, whether Buddhist or Christian, that a life of gratitude lifts one above ideology and morality? Beyond legalism and intolerance. Beyond ignorance and illusion. That gratitude helps save us from being constricted ("cribbed, cabined and confined") by that narrow, crooked streak which runs through the lives of us all?

Gratitude is the fundamental way of relating to the Real, the primordial ground of life and the transcendent element in life.

To live without gratitude is to die a dry and dusty death, smothered by the debris of self-deception, parched by the illusion that we are self-sufficient and independent.

Gratitude lifts us above the ordinary, the natural, the flat plain on which we spend most of our lives. It acknowledges depth in life and points to the immeasurable, the incomparable, the incomprehensible. It reveals and acknowledges the eternal structure of Reality.

Gratitude implies humility, suggests dependence and results in interdependence. It spawns a multitude of virtues, sweetens personal relations and saves us from arrogance and pride.

A sense of gratitude liberates us from the ladder of striving and frees us from the relentless wheel that wears us down by defining life in terms of success and failure. It releases us from the oppressive tomb of guilt and replaces fear as a controlling force in life.

Isn't it true that in the end what matters most is a life lived in and out of gratitude?

Shakespeare had it right:

"Blow, blow, thou winter wind!
Thou art not so unkind
As humanity's ingratitude.
Freeze, freeze, thou bitter sky!
Thou dost not bite so nigh
As benefits forgot."

I believe at the very base of my being that we are all bound together in this bundle of life and that if we will live with gratitude

in sickness and in health
in poverty and in wealth
when happy or sad
when good or bad
and by this way of living
affect (however modestly)
another person so to live
then we will not have lived in vain.

CONCLUSION

This address has been prepared and delivered as an expression of my gratitude to the Buddhist Churches of America for every kindness and courtesy afforded me during the past ten years.

I hope that what I have said and done today (and during these years together) will not have dimmed your understanding of Amida nor impeded your journey to the Pure Land.

My coming among you and now my leaving remind me of that moving statement at the entrance of the Buddhist Temple in Toronto which reads:

"I went out alone.
But returned with another.
How grateful I am.
Namu Amida Butsu accompanied me back."

Okage-sama
which I understand to mean
I owe it all to you; it is all due to your efforts
thank you very much