



# Living the LOTUS

*Buddhism in Everyday Life*

## Being Thankful

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### **Bitter and Sorrowful Thoughts Can Result in Knowing What Is Precious and Being Able to Be Kind**

I wish you all a happy New Year.

I believe each of you has greeted the New Year with a multitude of thoughts. Shakyamuni has taught us that human beings live not in the future or in the past, but now, in this moment. We should know that what is in front of us at this moment is more important than anything else, and it must be carefully and properly engaged.

As you know, Japan is a country where natural disasters happen frequently. This past year was no exception, with major earthquakes in Kumamoto and Tottori in southwestern Japan, in which many people were hurt and their homes were damaged. There was also a series of floods caused by typhoons.

I visited Kumamoto in June and saw the extent of the damage myself. In October, I visited Iwate Prefecture where the massive earthquake and tsunami had struck five and a half years before, and I observed the state of its recovery and restoration and how life is there today.

When I met some of our members in the disaster area, what they had to say left a strong impression in my mind. Even though they had experienced so many hardships, I heard them speak the words “thankful” and “grateful” countless times.

Needless to say, they have not recovered, even now, from the loss of immediate family and friends. And there are a great many who are anxious about the future. But they are deeply grateful that with the Buddha Dharma as support and by joining hands with their fellow sangha members, they have been able to move on, little by little.

Those who have lost a lot are the ones who understand what is most precious. It is precisely because they have bitter and sorrowful memories that they can understand the suffering of others and be considerate. Through the example of these members I felt this strongly once again.

It is partly on the basis of such encounters that I am presenting the following as the Guidelines for Members' Practice of the Faith in 2017. They say:



# New Year's Guidance

This year let us once again keep our attention focused on the things that are important, without becoming overwhelmed by the complicated realities of our daily lives, and begin our dissemination work under the themes we have each created for ourselves.

Shakyamuni Buddha taught us that the gift of human life is rare and precious. Let us express and practice our gratitude for this precious gift in our daily lives.

Let us walk the bodhisattva way (the right path for humanity) with the same affection and consideration for others that were shown by the Buddha, and by our Founder and Cofounder, with our basic human qualities of cheerfulness, kindness, and warmheartedness.

For several years now, my guidelines have included living a theme and walking the bodhisattva path with cheerfulness, kindness, and warmheartedness.

Things are mastered for the first time after repeated practice. I would like each of you to recall what sort of diligence you promised as your theme — to think back on your first resolve and your first enthusiasm, and to constantly strive with renewed feeling.

This year I am stating for the first time, “Shakyamuni Buddha taught us that the gift of human life is rare and precious. Let us express and practice our gratitude for this precious gift in our daily lives.”

We are taught that if we delve deeply into the teachings of Shakyamuni we will ultimately be able to feel gratitude. The new paragraph in the guidelines contains a spirit that is that precious.

## Express a Mindset of Gratitude, and Put it into Practice

Generally, we feel gratitude when a person does something for us or when our circumstances take a turn for the better.

That is a quite natural working of the mind, but the true gratitude that Shakyamuni teaches is a profound thankfulness for the rather ordinary, uneventful occurrences.

There is a famous passage in the Dhammapada that says, “Difficult is it to be born human; difficult is the existence of mortals, knowing they must eventually die; difficult is the hearing of the Dharma; rare is the appearance of the enlightened ones (buddhas).”

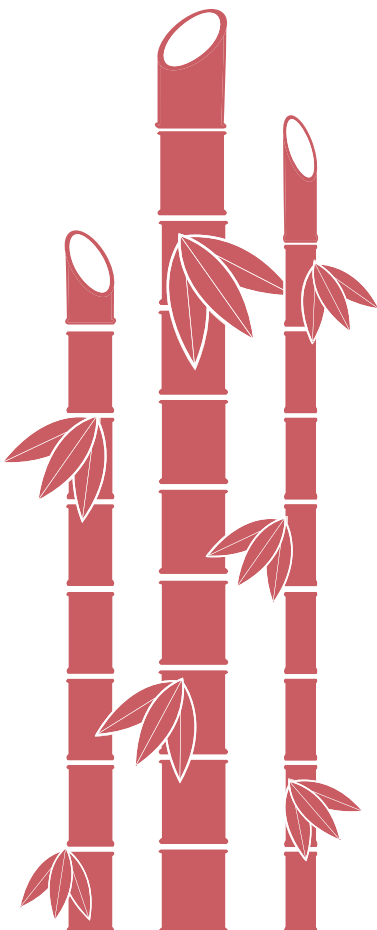
It is difficult for a human to be given life, and for we mortals who happen to be living now, it is something for which we are thankful. Even though we have been given life, coming into contact with the correct teachings during the time we are living is rare and something to be thankful for. It is hard to be born into this present world on the earth, where multitudes of buddhas are dwelling all over. That is the sense of the passage.

We normally say *arigato*, “thank you,” in Japanese, as an expression of gratitude. The Japanese word for this expression is derived from *arigatashi*, meaning “rare.” The expression is used in the passage from the Dhammapada. That is, it begins by saying we should be grateful for being born human.

Furthermore, it is not by our own power that we are living. We owe our lives to our parents and ancestors, obviously, but also to those around us, the light of the sun, the water, the air, the animals and plants—all the things in the universe.

Our hands move, we can walk, we can eat, we can breathe, speak, and sleep. There are indeed so many things we are already blessed with.

Furthermore, unlike other animals, we have been given life in this world as humans—blessed with extraordinary intelligence, with a power to understand things



and the ability to express them using spoken and written language, thereby attaining growth while communicating with others.

The true gratitude that Shakyamuni has taught us is not gratitude for something special that has happened, but gratitude for the true aspect of all things about life that are natural and unadorned.

So, what does it mean to express and put into practice a mindset of gratitude in our daily lives?

First, we should reflect thoroughly on the fact that as humans we have been given precious, wondrous life, and we should live that life with all our might each day and with purpose.

At the same time, precisely because we ourselves have been given life thanks to everything in the universe, we must respect all things that exist and live in harmony with them.

We can also say that filial piety and ancestor appreciation (*senzo kuyo*) are the basis of our gratitude for their relaying to us our irreplaceable lives.

If we thoroughly accept our encounters with the Buddha Dharma, we come to understand the importance of *tedori* (guiding fellow members) and *michibiki* (introducing others to the Dharma), which would allow many more to know of the true value of religion.

For example, it is good for shopkeepers to make a practice of thanking their customers. It would also be wonderful for them to habitually welcome customers with a warm smile and a gentle manner, and to keep the shop clean so that it's comfortable.

At home, at school, in the workplace, in the neighborhood—you can think of many ways to show thankfulness wherever you happen to be. I would like each of you to think of these on your own initiative and put them into action.

### **Becoming Able to Be Grateful Is One and the Same as Being Liberated and Experiencing Happiness**

Also, something you particularly must not forget is to express your gratitude precisely in words. I know there are people who think “I’m thankful in my mind” or “they should know I’m grateful even if I don’t say so,” but even so, precisely expressing it in words to begin with will convey your thoughts.

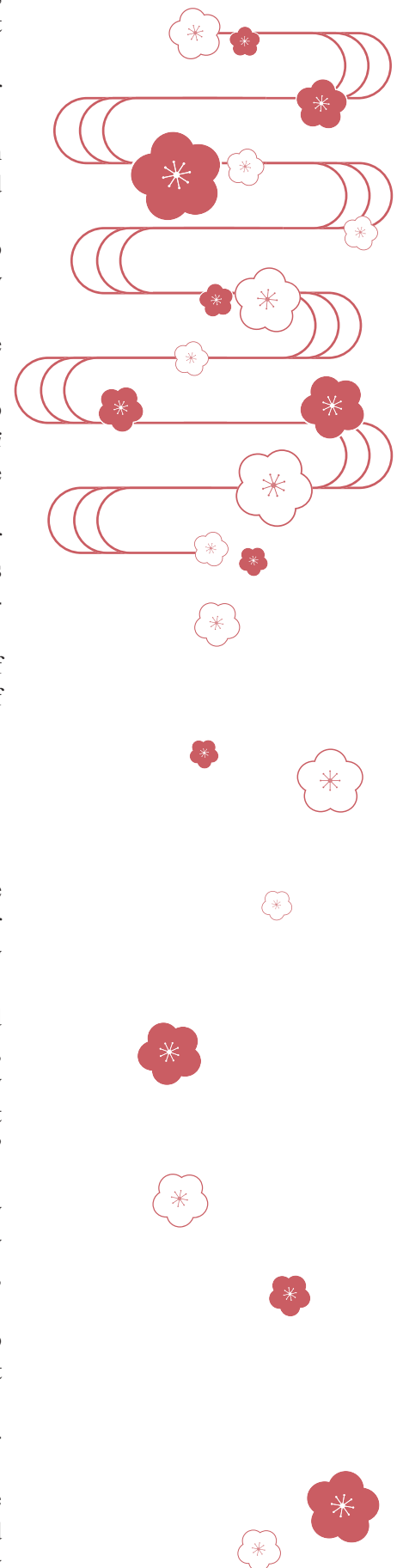
Some time ago I visited a certain Dharma center, and among the things I heard from the members was from a youth who was bearing a grudge against his father, whom he could not forgive. I told him, “Even if you don’t really feel grateful, try saying thanking him even if it’s only outward. If not for your father, you would not have been born into this world, so why not express your gratitude with that in mind? I think a path might open from there.”

If it’s not heartfelt, you can still express gratitude and go through the motions. Try expressing it first. That is the first step, or half step. Beginning to express it formally is actually very important. This is because by going through the motions properly, your mind will gradually fall in line.

If you only thank people when you feel like it, you might never thank anyone, no matter how much time passes by. Together, with just a little boldness, make an effort to express gratitude in spoken words.

A mindset of gratitude can give people a lot of energy when they feel overwhelmed by difficult situations.

When I visited Iwate Prefecture recently I had the opportunity to meet with the husband of a local leader who had perished in the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami in northeastern Japan. Even though he had lost his wife and house, he is now



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learning the Buddha's teachings, which he believes his wife had left for him to practice, and he is grateful for the many insights he has had, proclaiming in a loud voice, "I have been reborn! Thank you!"

It will likely take a lot more time for him to overcome his sorrow and suffering. Yet when a person becomes able to say "I'm grateful" and "thank you," they can gain the strength to live through any pain and suffering. The husband's words have renewed my realization of this fact.

Since cultivating gratitude is part of perfecting oneself as a human being, we can say that this practice also brings spiritual liberation and happiness. Being able to be grateful is our primary purpose in life and is itself spiritual liberation and happiness.

Also, the essence of the basic teachings of Shakyamuni—"all things are impermanent" and "all things are devoid of a separate self"—amounts to gratitude.

Becoming human beings who are capable of gratitude—don't you think we can say that this is, after all, the aim of our faith?

Apparently, habitual complaining and discontent can make us sick. It is said that being cheerful at all times and being grateful for all things will make us healthy and cure us of illness.

Not only would I like all of us to have our own theme and walk the bodhisattva path, but I also would like to accumulate our expressions and practice of the words "I'm grateful" and "thank you."

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