

# Grace

What it is  
I know not,  
But with gratitude  
My tears fall.  
—Saigyō

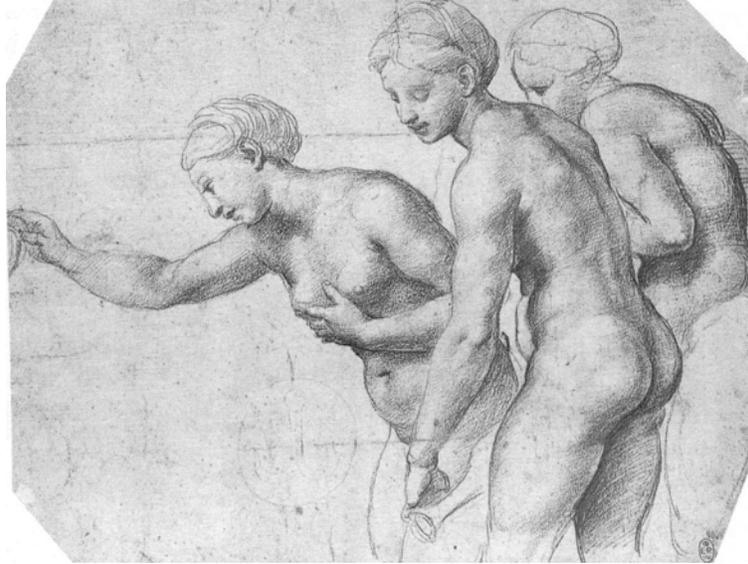
One day years ago I said to my father, “How can I ever hope to repay you and Mum for all that you have done for me?” And he replied, “You’ll repay us when you have your own children.” These simple words say so much. In them I hear not only how my father’s love was (and is) freely given to my brother and me, without expectation of reward; his own parents are there too, in the background. Even though I never met them (they both died before I was born), I am a beneficiary of their love. My father’s gratitude to them has been embodied in his giving to me, and so their giving lives on. Behind my grandparents are their parents, and theirs, and so on, endlessly. And in the picture appear not only my ancestors, but also generations of their caregivers, teachers, and mentors; the priests, poets and artists who inspired them and made the culture that formed them; the animals who carried them; the bricks that sheltered them; the food that fed them – the list is boundless. All of this and more has contributed to my existence. And while I don’t have any children of my own, I hope that through me this great stream of giving will continue to flow on to others.

It is no wonder that the first of the *Paramitas* (perfections of the bodhisattva) is *Dana*, or Giving. There can be few more powerful or indestructible forces in the universe – or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that *Dana* is one way of describing how the universe operates. My father understood, as the bodhisattva does, that to give is to receive. And his words helped me to understand that to receive is both to give (an opportunity to the giver) and to be schooled in the art of giving. Giving and receiving arise together and depend on each other. Robert Aitken sums this up beautifully when he writes in his book *The Practice Of Perfection*:

The English word *gratitude* is related to *grace*. It is the enjoyment of receiving as expressed in giving. It is a living, vivid mirror in which giving and receiving form a dynamic practice of interaction. For receiving, too, is a practice. Look at the word *arigato*, Japanese for “thank you.” It means literally, “I have difficulty.” In other words, “Your kindness makes it hard for me to respond with equal grace.” . . . The word *arigato* expresses the practice of receiving.

In receiving we experience our dependence, which the ego, with its fantasy of separation, hates to acknowledge, but secretly believes in and finds disconcerting. When one holds tightly to notions of self and other, receiving gracefully can be extremely difficult; for some people it's harder than giving (which at least offers some ego gratification). But when we do allow ourselves to feel genuine gratitude rather than anxiety, giving will grow naturally out of it, and it becomes a joy to be able to repay a debt or return a favor, directly or indirectly. Grace flows from gratitude.

The word grace has rich associations in our culture, and can perhaps contribute to Westerners' understanding of *Dana*. One aspect of grace is its grounding in the physical. We use it to describe seemingly effortless beauty in the way a person moves or in a work of art. It is also everywhere in nature, from a squirrel scampering along a branch to the spirals of a falling leaf; but in human affairs grace is often the result of long and arduous cultivation. A renowned voice teacher, Cecily Berry, said that there was no right way to say a particular line of text, but a thousand wrong ways, and that voice training consisted simply in eliminating them. Training in any discipline moves from this kind of effort towards harmony and freedom from obstructions, and it is sustained throughout by love for the discipline itself – a love which is given form and communicated to others in the work of art that results.



The Latin *gratus*, from which both grace and gratitude are derived, means “pleasing” and “beloved.” Other related words are *agree* and *bard* (“he who praises”). A work of art, which often deals with the direst sufferings and the darkest human impulses, still gives aesthetic pleasure because, through the beauty of its form, it acknowledges and brings

clarity to those negative aspects of existence. Through our enjoyment we are brought into a kind of harmony with even the most hard to accept aspects of life (for artists with a revolutionary agenda this presents a thorny koan – can art give pleasure and galvanize into action at the same time?) Before I got into Zen, the most Samadhi-like experiences I had had were while reading poetry – but at a certain point I realized I was depending on someone else’s affirmations. Poetry was fine for pointing me in the right direction, but I wanted to experience that kind of agreement in life itself, and so I was led to Zen practice. Zen trains us to *live* gracefully, to find poetry in the commonplace, to accept with good grace even disagreeable things. Grace is related to the word for “thank you” in several romance languages – a meaning that lingers in our use of the word to mean a prayer of thanks for a meal (more about that later) – but it can also mean the gift itself, as in the Christian concept of God’s grace. And while we may not believe in a personified supreme being who bestows favors upon us, more sophisticated understandings of grace accord with the way we experience change: the suddenness and ease of transformation when it comes (in its own time), its brilliance and beauty; the gratuitousness of a lower blooming, the appearance of a friend, or a cool breeze on a hot day; the way the most important things happen not because we will them to, but because . . . we know not. That is often how we experience an insight that occurs during sitting – as a gift and as a “given” – there all along, but up until that moment unnoticed because we weren’t ready to notice. Receptivity is the key.

One of the most primal ways in which we experience the mystery of transformation is in relation to food. In our grace we chant, “This meal is the labor of countless beings, let us remember their toil!” We eat, and the toil of the sun, earthworms, farmers, truckers, road maintenance crews, oil companies, and supermarket check-out workers . . . of cooks, cabbages and tax collectors, becomes our very cells. Thich Nhat Hanh describes this as the way in which the so-called self is made up entirely of “non-self elements.” And so we continue our chant, “Our meal [that is, ourselves] is offered to Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. With teachers and family, with nations and all life let us equally share. To beings throughout the six worlds we offer this meal.” No other response would be sufficient, and to be insensible to this endless process of transubstantiation is pathological. Josef Stalin is reported to have said, “Gratitude . . . is a sickness suffered by dogs.”

Discovery of the Dharma arouses in us the strongest gratitude of all, and the Sangha is built on it. Chanting the Ancestral Line gives expression to this foundation. It starts with our invoking the support of our ancestors:

O Awakened ones, may the power of your Samadhi sustain us!

. . . and ends with a vow:

You who have handed down the light of Dharma,  
We shall repay your benevolence!

Dogen elaborates:

Quietly consider the fact that if this were a time when the true Law had not yet spread throughout the world, it would be impossible for us to come into contact with it, even if we were willing to sacrifice our lives to do so. How fortunate to have been born in the present day, when we are able to make this encounter! . . . If the Buddha and patriarchs had not directly transmitted the Law, how could it have come down to us today? We should be grateful for even a single phrase or portion of the Law, still more for the great benefit accruing from the highest supreme teaching – the Eye Storehouse of the True Law. . . . The true way of expressing this gratitude is not to be found in anything other than our daily Buddhist practice itself. . . . Each day's life should be esteemed; the body should be respected. It is through our body and mind that we are able to practice the Way; this is why they should be loved and respected. It is through our own practice that the practice of the various Buddhas appears and their great Way reaches us. Therefore each day of our practice is the same as theirs, the seed of realizing Buddhahood.

Receiving and giving are one. Meister Eckhardt has said, "If the only prayer you say in your whole life is 'thank you,' that would suffice." But in truth that prayer has to *be* our life. This is the life of the Bodhisattva.

—*Amala Wrightson*

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