

The Right Angle - It's never wrong

By Venerable Luang Por Liam
(translated by Ajahn Siripaño)



Venerable Luang Por Liam Thitadhammo (Phra Visuddhisamvara Thera) was born in Thailand and entered the monastery as a novice in 1960. He took higher ordination in 1961. Since 1969, Luang Por Liam has stayed at Wat Nong Pa Pong and trained under his teacher Luang Por Chah. In 1977, Luang Por was asked to officially become the deputy abbot at Wat Nong Pa Pong.

Luang Por Liam looked after the monastery in many ways, both in the training of the monks and in the maintenance of the monastery buildings. He built a commemorative museum for Luang Por Chah's requisites and rebuilt a new large Dhammasala and new dining hall. They were finished on the night of January 15, 1992. The following day, Luang Por Chah passed away. Luang Por Liam was officially made the new abbot of Wat Nong Pa Pong in 1994 until now.

In 2001, Luang Por Liam was given the ecclesiastical honorary title "Tan Chao Khun Visuddhi-samvara Thera" by His Majesty the King of Thailand.

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 left our mother's womb. We'd have no food to eat, clothes to wear or house to live in. Our parents, whose faces we had not even seen before, gave us life and all the things we needed to make us healthy and strong. For our clothes and living places, and all the various skills we learned, we are entirely indebted to others. From the very first moment in our mother's womb, we owe a debt of gratitude to countless people, besides our parents and all our teachers, to whom our sense of gratitude 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 *kataññutā*. The effort to repay the debt is called *kataveditā*. The ones who know what has been done for them are called *kataññu*. And those who return the favor gratefully are called *katavedi*.

Kataññu-katavedita: 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. Failure to understand this truth 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 and 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 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 **will prosper and flourish** 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 to our** parents and teachers, since these are the true *devas* illuminating our lives, the *pūjaniya-puggala*: 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 to 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 **would not** happen. The things which **gladdened** the mind would be plentiful all over the earth, **and wherever we are**, 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**, 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 realize the path and fruit of Nibbana.

People without *kataññu* do not know the value of these adversities, and they heap disaster and peril onto 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. The most demonic of people, the world's *māras*, they venerate as if they were virtuous monks. The *yakkha* types, those who are insatiably greedy or angry, they view as truly worthy human beings. They see the generous side of stingy people and, even in others' jealousy, they manage to find a degree of warmth.

If all people felt this way, how could our world fail to become a heavenly realm?

We should all be grateful to our enemies, for they are the ones who give us life's highest teachings, lessons which are to be found nowhere else. We should therefore give thanks to them and honor such teachers with our own efforts to embody goodness, sharing the blessings of our life with them. There is so much to be grateful to our enemies for – people with *kataññu* are very aware of this. With no enemies or obstacles in life, the world would be empty of truly capable people.

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, the heat from the frictions of the world becomes cool.

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.

Not a single one of us was conceived in a hollow tree stump. We all arose in the little space of our mother's womb, with the help of our father too. Having been born into the wide world, we survived through to maturity thanks to the daily sacrifices of our parents and all the countless others who played a role in our lives. The Buddha and all wise people point to the role of our parents, honoring them as our primary caregivers who, having brought us forth, provided us with all the support we needed to flourish. They are the ones who equipped us with the skills for living, taught us how to be good and gave us many other things that have brought blessings into our lives.

Anyone who lacks *integrity and incapable* of feeling appreciation for his or her parents, will surely never know the debt they owe their enemies. Deeply absorbing one's parents' qualities is a clear sign of *kataññu*, wherever in the world a person is from. One who lacks gratitude to his or her parents will never fully be trusted.

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 honor the good name of their spiritual home and they constantly share the merits of their wholesome actions with their mother, father and teachers.

The Lord Buddha once said that when we reflect correctly on the qualities of someone who has died, then only one path lies open to us – that of developing goodness in ourselves. In the broadest sense this means to honor that person and share the blessings of our life with them. So anyone who loves their mother, father or spiritual guide, and who knows the debt owed to them, should turn their hearts and minds to that which is beneficial for the world.

The Blessed One, the Buddha, is known as the supreme teacher for the ability he had to deepen people’s awareness to a point where they no longer experienced any suffering at all, to a state of nobility, a realization of enlightenment.

The Dhamma taught by him is a pathway to improve the mind and go beyond the oceans of suffering. The Sangha, men and women whose lives are dedicated to following his teachings, have handed down these truths over the years until they have reached us here today.

This [opportunity](#) we have to receive these highest gifts is as wonderful as if the Blessed One himself [was](#) offering them directly to us. 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.

We can be encouraged, then, that the teachings are nothing other than our true rightful inheritance, passed down through the *kataññu* of the Noble Ones of former times, who were determined to live their lives in line with the Blessed One’s intentions. This *kataññu* of the enlightened disciples has allowed the Dhamma to span the millennia and, still to this day, the world can find respite in the cool refuge and under the shade of these teachings of awakening. All this is because of the constant hardships endured, and the sacrifices made, based on the spirit of *kataññu* flowing strong in the hearts of the liberated ones.

The world is protected by the Dhamma because from the time of the Buddha onwards, members of the assembly of his disciples have not wandered away from his instructions, their lives always following his guidelines, thus they have honored and

kept alive his spiritual qualities. Gratitude is what protects the world and, in turn, is something that we should all protect.

In truth, all good Buddhist traditions and customs have arisen based on the principle of *kataññu-katavedi*. They were born out of gratitude and were designed to further instill this sense deeply into the hearts of the next generation. All our various rites and rituals, starting with the cremation of our parents and teachers, should be grounded in a spirit of *kataññu-katavedi*. This needs to be firmly established in everyone's mind more than any other thought. So we carry out these ceremonies with true dedication – with no sense that there might be too much fuss and bother or that the expenses are in anyway wasted – because we see how important it is for our lives to be suffused with a feeling of *kataññu-katavedi* and how, in turn, this makes the world a cool and pleasant place.

All the traditions and religions of every nation, of every tongue have these principles at heart. In our Buddhist teachings, we must take great care to ensure that however we repay our debt of gratitude, our efforts are not wasted but are genuinely beneficial for society. In this way the feelings of gratitude which should be felt by all Buddhists bring cool shade to the world and lift up peoples' hearts.

If all of us could realize this highest truth – the fact that each of us human beings has a debt of gratitude to everyone without exception, even, again, those who perceive each other as mutual enemies – then people would vie with one another to carry out acts of goodness and virtue in order to fully pay off the debts we owe.

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 do at times, unthinkingly, we will be quick to ask 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 *yakkha* 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.

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