

Grateful Heart: A Buddhist Way of Healing

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I am utterly humbled to have received the honor of addressing you all today. Thank you, especially to Dr. Bloom for all he has done.

Shinran Shōnin's psychologically insightful teachings have thrived for three-quarters of a millennium for a reason. Among numerous other communities, they have sustained this community through a century and two decades full of challenges and change. The power of Shinran is that he is an exemplar of how to live with honest awareness of one's own weaknesses, which when plumbed deeply gives rise to a heart of gratitude.

Today I will draw on real-life stories of elder Buddhists who have shared with me their healing practices and experiences. They reveal Buddhist ways to cultivate and express gratitude in daily living amidst the challenges of the heart, body, and mind. The collective experiences of these people range from facing death through disease, the untimely loss of family members, and crippling chronic pain. These experiences have in turn given rise to powerful emotional responses including paralytic fear, agonizing heartache, depression over the loss of dreams, and terror about not being able to perform daily tasks. The healing practices include making offerings, chanting, and praying on a regular basis, engaging in aesthetic practices like writing poetry, doing calligraphy, and enjoying the tea ceremony. They also include doing daily chores as activities of the heart. These are the resources that fuel their resilience and strength. Though they appear to be simple acts, requiring no officiant and done in the privacy of one's own home, these practices form the framework within which tremendous challenges of the human spirit can be woven into compelling tapestries that heal with the power of gratitude.

Healing is central to the Buddhist path – as attested to by references to the Buddha as the Great Physician and by the medical analogy of the Four Noble Truths – diagnosis, cause, prognosis, and treatment. The ultimate healing is the cessation of suffering. The assumption is that we are born with a longing for good things to be permanent and that we seek the fulfillment of our desires. This is the primary condition from which we must be healed. Therefore, healing involves the transformation of habitually deluded ways of looking at the world through the lenses of desire and aversion. The treatment is to experience interrelatedness. The difficulty lies in the task of realizing profound interrelatedness in the midst of conflict, misunderstanding, and loneliness.

Today, I will explore the power gratitude can have in fostering an experience of interrelatedness. Gratitude helps one heal from delusions that falsely divide and unnecessarily discourage. Indeed, healing occurs in each expression of gratitude.

Umemura-san shared an experience when flowers taught her a life lesson that helped her heal. A sublime experience while riding her bike to get to work reached deeply into her sense of being. Awareness flashed through the cracks opened by profound sadness over the loss of her mother.

"When I was riding my bike on a cold day in February with snow falling, I saw the bud of a plum blossom. I thought of all the energy the bud was exerting to bloom even in the winter. It is not just the energy of the bud, it is the energy of the universe working to bloom this flower. The world is working so hard to activate this flower, and it is working for me, too! At

that instant I felt embraced by that energy! A compassionate power!! There is a HUGE power in the universe that aims to blossom flowers." [1]

The plum blooms as winter just begins to give way to spring. It is said the most beautiful time to see a tiny plum budding is when it is partially veiled with a light snow, for it is in such a moment the gentle flower reveals its strength and deepest beauty. As testimony to its true nature, the tiny plum bud had the strength to enter Umemura-san's heart and mind, enabling her to see the nature of the universe. She suddenly realized how she, too, is supported by the whole universe. To her delight she found it a compassionate universe. The flower showed her how hard the universe works to give rise to its blooming, and, by implication, it is working for her, too. Her mother is gone, but she is not alone. A whole compassionate universe, including her mother's energy, embraces her each moment of the day. Her gratitude helps her be more like a plum blossom: strong enough to be gentle in the harshest conditions.

A tea ceremony can also be a time of healing that emerges out of a grateful heart. Please follow along as we step into the garden. Generating an inviting sense of fresh life, the rock path meandering through the garden leading to the tea room has been recently moistened. With each step, the strains and weariness of stressful demands are left behind, as each stone leads you deeper into the tranquility of the garden. On arriving at the well, pause to reflect on the carving in the stone basin: "I only know satisfaction." Reaching with your right hand to lift the long, thin-handled bamboo dipper, reflect on how you would feel if all you knew were contentment – no desires pulling or aversions pushing, no complaints or disappointments.

Upon entering the tea room, we bow greetings to each other. We sit quietly, wanting to maintain the purity and tranquility of the moment. Once in the tea room, the host enters and we all bow out of respect for each other. This establishes us as an harmonious group. We will help each other heal as a natural byproduct of engaging fully in the aesthetic enjoyment of tea together, nothing gratuitous, nothing lacking. First, to balance the bitterness of the *matcha* green tea that will come later, the host offers elegantly arranged confections that reflect the autumnal season. It looks as if chestnuts have just gently fallen on the celadon ceramic plate. The guest's hearts are captivated by the refinement and delicacy of the sweets, their beauty amplified by the silence. The host then makes the tea with exquisitely flowing gestures. Each intricate detail is executed with an ease that only comes from a relaxed comfort in being fully embodied and devoted to the present moment, respecting each utensil and meticulous movement for its precise part in preparing tea for a friend. A bow of gratitude and respect accompanies each item served, passed, or returned. A heightened awareness through all our senses permeates our hearts, beauty nourishing our body-mind. We experience a finely tuned joy in just being, our hearts expanding their capacity to accept and be compassionate. Tea has helped us inhabit our integrated place in the universe. That place is one where there is only space for satisfaction.

Yamamoto-san related to me her personal experience with the healing power of tea. She elaborates on the quality of tranquility. "Silence is treasured, because it embraces you and supports you in the deepest and weakest places. It is safe to be just as you are. You are accepted as you are. You are protected and cared for. Your deepest needs are understood and met." [2] Another woman, Ogawa-san also stresses tranquility when reflecting on what occurs in tea that she finds so healing. She went on to explain how it is different from her everyday life routine:

"Tea focuses me on the present moment and to be in it with a deliberate awareness of being. You enter the world of tea where beauty is of central importance, which is a world where the heart and spirit are principal. It is also a world where all things are treated with

vital significance, because everything is interrelated. The distinction between animate and inanimate is not made. It is a mix of Shinto kami and Buddhist interrelatedness." [3]

Even when one knows the potential for tea to heal, the depth of their experiences is remarkable. Sharing a cup of tea – when done with purity, harmony, respect, and tranquility – reveals the potential for all daily actions to be opportunities for grateful healing.

Another aesthetic practice that helps heal the heart and to open it to grateful living is calligraphy, especially the ritualized practice of scripture copying. Brushed calligraphy is an art that visibly mirrors the heart-mind of the brush holder. The art begins with making the ink. To prepare the ink, a solid ink stick is dipped into a reservoir of water drops pooled in a stone, carved and polished expressly to serve the calligrapher. Imagine holding the ink stick in your hand as you press down on it and draw droplets up from the pooled water to the silken smooth flat surface of the stone. Gentle, slow, rhythmic rubbing and light pressure yields a finer solution. An erratic, rapid motion and heavy pressure produce a viscous solution. How thick or thin the ink is a vital ingredient for expressing the state of being of the calligrapher. Thick ink takes patient determination to make, and therefore indicates stamina and power. The ink quality will even distinguish different kinds of power. Power that erupts out of angry frustration makes rough, uneven ink. The power of steady confidence and strength makes smooth, even ink. Too much water and only brief rubbing of the ink stick on the stone surface results in thin ink, often an indication of fatigue, despair, or fear. Even as you rub the ink stick into the water on the ink rubbing stone, you can see the quality of ink that is produced. The reflection of your heart-mind in the ink might nudge you to slow down and relax or ignite determination to not give up.

How deeply the brush is inserted into the ink and how much is stroked off along the smooth surface of the ink stone determines the quality and character of the color with which the hairs of the brush are swathed. Each hair of the brush is a delicate instrument that attunes to the subtlest reverberations of emotion and the slightest turn of thought. These guide it in moving the ink across the paper. If the person holding the brush is sad and tired, or impatient with their pain, it is all laid bare on the page. If the brush is moved by deep gratitude for having one more day to live, or softened by compassion, the flow of the brush reveals a deeper quality of movement. The brush only records what occurs in the present moment. Therefore, a line of characters reflects the sequence and shifts of emotions and thoughts as they move across time. At each moment in this aesthetic practice, you receive immediate feedback on the condition of your heartmind. Hence, you can make decisions and adjustments along the way. In the course of writing a long page, you can gradually find a stable peace.

Poetry writing can also be done as a healing activity. For example, a woman, Tamura-san, wrote the following poem at a time when she was adjusting to a whole new phase and rhythm of life. She had cared for her own home for decades, and she had just moved into a home with her oldest son's family. They newly built the house with this living arrangement in mind. She had her own space with a view of a beautiful traditional Japanese garden. She herself was surprised by the emotions that surfaced. She said she had never felt lonelier in her life.

"Loneliness is not in the mountains. It is not in the city when a person is by herself. It is when a person is among many people."

She had not anticipated it, but it was the sounds that made her lonely. She could dimly hear them from the other side of the house. Her son's family had their own established routines. As they discussed the day's activities and planned for the next – making sure everybody had what they needed – Tamura-san was an outsider in her own home. Recognizing this

was an opportunity to understand the human condition with deeper understanding, she brushed the poem. Putting it into words helped her release some pain as she saw that she was not alone. Others, too, feel this kind of loneliness. Later she penned, "The places the eyes of the flesh see have a limit. The places the eyes of the heart see have no limit." This awareness helps her feel connected and retrain her focus on what there is to be grateful for: a safe home with family nearby and friendships with others in similar situations as herself.

A rare but powerfully effective ritual that helps people heal through cooperating with others is called the *Hyakumanben* 百万遍, literally meaning "One Million Times," referring to a metaphorically large number of times to pass the prayer beads around. The *juzu* prayer beads are often made of sandalwood. There are 108 beads. You focus on what you care about as you pass it around. The ritual begins with all sitting around the large string of prayer beads that had been neatly placed into a circle on the tatami-mat floor. An altar is placed in the center. A purple-robed priest lights a very long stick of incense and the chanting of various sutras begins. Once complete, "Namu Amida Butsu" is repeated about a dozen times. The whole group cooperates in raising the prayer beads and slowly begins passing them while chanting "Namu Amida Butsu." As the tempo increases, it transmutes into "NamAmidabu": the sound made when crossing the lips of those intimate with saying it over and over and over and over. When the one extra large softball-sized bead lands between your two hands, you raise it to your forehead in reverence. It is a delicate dance of rhythmic motion passing the beads. Adjustments in speed, tension, and timing are constantly made to accommodate someone using one hand while wiping their face (of sweat from the activity), shifting their bodies (due to legs falling asleep with two hours of sitting on them), or their arms needing to get a little reprieve from the steady and rigorous movement. During the last twenty minutes of the hour of passing, the tempo accelerates to a furious pace. The volume of the chant concomitantly rises to a feverish pitch. A split second of one person not being completely focused on the present moment of bead passing causes the whole chain to go into contortions, everybody making the necessary adjustments to get it back on track. Everyone is clearly all in this together. Each person's actions affect everyone else, but each in a different way. Everybody has to respond as one organism to maintain the rhythm. It is such a physically driven group practice that makes interrelatedness an immediate and visceral reality. The power of this coordinated motion went deeper than (inherently dualistic) words can reach to make one experience the nature of our intricate interconnections and impact on each other. Being part of the chain leaves one knowing at a cellular level support is there, responding to subtle changes and needs. Words are not necessary here. Every body understands, is rejuvenated, and empowered to face the illness, loss, or troubles one brought with them. Each heart is renewed with gratitude that others are supporting and assisting them each step of the way.

When caring for an elder, however, sometimes gratitude gets lost in the details of daily care. The challenges of caring for a person who gradually degenerates over several years are cumulative. The realization that an elder is no longer capable of doing something on their own is slow in the making, because of the desire on everyone's part for the person to be strong and healthy. It is also a matter of respect when you are caring for an elder. When the power shifts and the younger generation needs to be assertive and take the lead is often imperceptible. There is no formal ritual recognizing this change that requires all parties to cultivate a new identity. In the shuffle, dignity, pride, and confidence are lost to the elder, while patience is often lost to the caregiver.

Yamaguchi-san shares her experiences. Grandma had been a model of the quintessential embodiment of elegance, grace, and kindness. Her humility was not put on for public appearances, rather, it reflected the core of her beauty and strength. As Grandma aged, however, she went from this refined mode of being to refusing to change her clothes soiled from toilet accidents, even when her grandson's friends complained about the stench in their home. After several years of this predicament, tensions and stubbornness reached seismic levels. A sharp butcher knife was drawn and aimed. Threats targeting the old

woman's last ounce of self-respect were fired. Yamaguchi-san, the daughter-in-law, exercised the tiny remainder of respect for her beloved mother-in-law by leaving the house. Although leaving a demented 97-year-old woman alone in the house was not necessarily safe, it was safer than if she had stayed. She had exhausted her patience years ago. Now her own grip on reality had snapped. She later returned, determined to make things better. Yamaguchi-san began chanting at the home Buddhist altar as Grandma had done everyday. The chanting builds in deep breathing, calming the heart, mind, and body. Starting her day with rituals at the home altar grounded her and enabled her to feel connected to something larger and more meaningful. She also realized that when she hung the laundry, cooked, and cleaned she embodied interrelatedness. The beauty in the present moment became easier to experience. With each of these experiences, Yamaguchi-san felt supported, connected, and energized. It is not that her patience was never tried again, but it was not lost. She had been able to keep the vow she made when grandma first moved in. "I vowed that I would make a home that was better for having grandma live with us. I am grateful that my children grew up in a home with three generations."

These glimpses of real people struggling with real life show us how the "Buddhist Way of Healing" is an art form. It is an art to seek out ways to heal and not suffer. More specifically, it is an art of choosing to be grateful in the face of fear-driven and torment-ridden possibilities. This way of living and interpreting the world, self, events, and others is a path cleared with prayers, washed with tears, and paved with gratitude. It is a holistic orientation where healing means experiencing a peace that does not shatter in the face of horrific events and delusional activities.

The key to Buddhist healing is experiencing interrelatedness. In order to experience the universe this way, focus on desire, hatred, and fear must be dissolved. The attachments that derive out of these foci obscure the interrelationships, invariably resulting in suffering. The root focus is on the here and now, because the mind cannot cut carrots and put them in the pot all by itself, no matter the level of concentration. The body must move. And the body can only move in the present. If this is the case for something relatively inconsequential as getting carrots in the soup, how much more so for things as important as healing, which, likewise, can only occur in the present.

Therefore, in this way of Buddhist healing, one must relate with sickness in the present as an active part of life. In contrast, a dualistic worldview sets up an adversarial dynamic between health and sickness where sickness is something to be attacked. It is an object apart from oneself. From this perspective, sickness can be construed to be an enemy. On the contrary, from a non-dualistic Buddhist view one can experience sickness as something with which one is in relationship, not something one wishes to defeat, destroy, or conquer. **How** one relates to the sickness makes all the difference. If one is unkind to the sickness, things often get worse. To relate well with a sickness, however, does not imply that the sickness will go away. Indeed, one must relate with a terminal diagnosis. The question is will the relationship be open to inevitable changes or will hostility and bitterness reign. A healing way to relate to a sickness would involve acceptance without resentment, gratitude for what there is, and peace in the face of demise.

Engaging in ritualized healing practices like those illustrated in the stories of the women shape, stretch, define, and re-define the identity of its participants. As one participates in them, one's consciousness changes. The power of these practices, however, does not lie in transmitting conscious knowledge, but in framing experience in such a way that it may be apprehended meaningfully. These ritualized practices can have the impact of lived experience because they are performed by the body. Real life is very messy and organic whereas discourse about life tends to be tidier and more linear. Ritualized practices are in-between. Moreover, activities with a long tradition or done with a group can make a person feel connected and that they belong, which in itself is healing.

What emerges from an examination of Buddhist-based aesthetic practices is a particular understanding of beauty-making as healing. It engages the principles of a Buddhist way of healing, which holds that if one is focused on acting from one's heart-mind, beauty and healing can permeate daily life. They engage the same mindfulness and aesthetic sensitivities required of the practices examined above to domestic tasks, including hanging laundry, cooking, serving food, cleaning floors, and washing dishes. When they do them as beauty-making activities they become healing activities. Beauty making is a positive choice. It is a choice to perceive and approach something in its wholeness, where its deepest beauty is illuminated.

It is not surprising that Yamamoto-san often noticed things to be grateful for in daily life.

"When I feel happy are the times I think I am healed. It mostly happens in the little things, like when hanging out the futons in the sun. When I feel grateful is when I feel happy, like when I am grateful to be in a warm place eating a good meal. The root of healing is gratitude." [4]

Gratitude practices that Tamura-san finds effective are similarly not burdensome. They also can be woven in as possible throughout a busy day. What's most important is to do it when you can. Things change. It's in the quiet, sitting time that Buddha teaches, in the cracks between all the things to do, cooking, childcare, work, etc. Then say what you are grateful for. You can just say thank you for today. To be grateful is the important thing.

In addition, ritualizing daily activities accomplishes many things, including care for self and others in the household, if there are any. Nurturing the self is a critical component of the process on two different planes. First, it is essential on a mundane level, because no matter what happens, you still need to eat, brush your teeth and bathe, clean your surroundings, launder clothes, and take out the trash. Secondly, skills that nurture the self affirm personal competence in the face of uncontrollable circumstances. After one brushes her teeth, she not only gets clean teeth, but she also gets a sense of personal competence. This is self-affirming. Rarely is brushing one's teeth or other basic tasks of daily life an intense experience of nurturing the self, but when healing is acutely needed, they can be. Those who have experienced debilitating suffering know the healing power of ritualized acts of self care.

Sometimes getting through a difficult situation is a matter of living with pain and loneliness, and having things to do that make a positive difference can make the time seem less intensely painful. If one did not have skills for nurturing the self, then the pain can become intractable. Another aspect of nurturing the self that is critical for healing is the sense of responsibility for one's own life. To maintain this perspective requires focus to not lose sight of the support one receives from the universe and respond with gratitude.

Finding joy in the subtle things in daily life is most important and is ripe for cultivating gratitude. It involves realizing a supple and flexible body-mind. If you have this, then you can enjoy life without setting conditions upon what is needed to experience joy. Being able to see what there is to be grateful for and enjoy the beauty in the present moment is a basic aspect of Buddhist healing. For Noguchi-san, awareness that she is not living just on her own power gives rise to feeling gratitude. She knows in her bones that it is the constellation of elements and events that work together in a manner that enables her to breathe, walk, travel to other countries, and have a safe home.

When one sees or creates beauty, it is not a strain to see what enormous support one receives from the universe. The fact that one is alive is proof that the universe embraces one. When one feels lonely, this awareness can sometimes make one feel connected and cared for. The type of gratitude that is especially healing is not construed as *me* being

grateful for *things*, because that sets up a dualism, which is incongruous with an interrelated worldview. If one is aware that one is already – without having to do anything special – an integral part of the world that is in a vast web of give and take, mutually influential, gratitude is a natural response.

When grateful, one does not have to work at seeing the good things in a situation, they just appear. Also, when in a grateful state of being, one does not need to work at not complaining. It is not a state of resisting, restraining, or repressing ones negative thoughts and feelings. They just do not arise when one is experiencing gratitude. Gratitude is, in a sense, a short cut to healing.

Part of cultivating gratitude involves developing an accepting heart. Without an accepting heart, indeed, there can be no healing. Not rejecting anything is fundamental to the healing process, because there are no conditions on healing. Receiving everything that occurs in one's life, however, is extraordinarily hard. It is to take the ritualized posture of *gassho* towards everything. It is a critical facet of Buddhist healing. In order to cultivate gratitude and develop an accepting heart, transforming one's perspective is critical. It requires learning from whatever happens and seeking what goodness, wisdom, or strength can be gained, especially from physical or psychological suffering. To do this requires focusing on the larger picture. The fundamental assumption is to be aware one is not living an independent life based upon one's own power and effort. This perspective naturally gives rise to a profound sense of gratitude for all things. Ever adjusting one's perspective with the vicissitudes of life enables one to accept one's life into one's heart, to feel grateful for and create beauty out of what is. To do this is to embody compassion. One can say, embodying compassion is the ultimate healing.

Even the deceptively simple act of listening is an embodiment of compassion. What happens when one is listened to is that one experiences not being alone. If one is understood, then it is confirmation that one is connected. It is proof that someone cares. It is not so much the act of speaking and pouring out ones problems as it is being heard that does the healing. In order to be a good listener one needs to have a receptive heart. And in order to have a receptive heart, one needs to be open to various perspectives. To be a good listener is to be a healer. To be listened to is to be healed. One who is healed is one who is compassionate. In other words, to be healed one must be a healer.

The Buddhist healing arts and practices help one see everything interrelated in a perpetual dance of change. Engaging in aesthetic practices are helpful, for the art of healing is a creative activity. These practices facilitate a direct experience of interrelatedness which gives rise to gratitude – a place where one can feel at peace and intimately connected. Connected to family and friends, connected to nature and the cosmos. The wisdom that emerges out of this awareness of one's interrelated wholeness engenders gratitude, helping one respond to the needs of the present moment with compassion.

Gratitude is a most potent healing balm. Umemura-san sums it up succinctly. "I know I am healed when I am kind."

References

- 1] Interview with Umemura on September 3, 1998 in Nagoya, Japan.
- 2] Interview with Yamamoto on July 28, 1998 in Nagoya, Japan.
- 3] Interview with Ogawa on October 19, 2005 in Nagoya, Japan.
- 4] Interview with Yamamoto on September 30, 1998 in Nagoya, Japan.