

Stumbling towards Gratitude

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Stumbling towards Gratitude.

Since my laryngectomy, I've joined a web-based support group called Webwhispers. Most of the members are American so in November they are particularly focussed on Thanksgiving. It made me think about why it is that I'm not feeling grateful more of the time. I have so much to be grateful for: the Dhamma, great friends, a lovely home, a pension, my mum and other family, a body that work pretty well. And so much more.

Yet it's so easy to get upset at small things. At our last meditation group meeting for example, we were meeting in a nursing home where Jimmy is recovering from surgery. Normally we meet at Jimmy's house on Wednesday evenings, do an hour's meditation together, discuss some text and chat over cup of tea. I've been going to the same group (though venue has shifted all over Dublin as new people joined and others move away) for almost thirty years now. That's another thing to be grateful for. And the friends I've met through that group – my best friends now. They have put themselves out time and time again to help me especially since my operation last year. Shouldn't I always feel grateful to them?

And yet ... those little things ... the trouble started when I dropped into a supermarket on my way to the nursing home to get a mug of tea and then got distracted by so much enticing stuff on the shelves and stuck in a long queue at the check-out and the assistant not being able to find 'mug of tea' on the check list and having to call the supervisor ... and realising I would be late and trying to hurry with my backpack full of groceries and a mug of tea in my hand and electro-larynx jiggling around my neck and headset microphone slipping off and the loudspeaker (tied around my waist) bumping my tummy as I stumbled along getting hot and sweaty, and arriving breathless and seeing that they had all signed in ahead of me (damn why couldn't one of them be late!) and finding them all chatting by Jimmy's bed. How is it such pleasant sounds come out of their mouths without any effort whatsoever? My mind is feeling small and peevish. They say hello – I put my face into a smile and nod vigorously at everyone, but can't reply with my hands full (you need a free hand to use an electro-larynx) and nowhere obvious to put my blessed (blasted?) tea, and then struggle to get my coat and backpack off – also my jacket and cardigan as it's hot in there. All the time they're

chatting and laughing— so annoying - my ill-temper finds fault with everyone and everything.

Then they decide to go to the chapel for meditation as Jimmy is now sharing his room with another man. Others gather up my jacket, cardigan, backpack, coat, tea as we head out. Why is it so hard to feel grateful for these small kindnesses? Instead I'm feeling irritated, dislocated, a nuisance, a burden to myself and everyone, bad humoured. I haven't yet said a word and when Margaret asks a simple question about my car I misunderstand her and answer 'no' for 'yes' and then seeing my mistake, try to explain while my electro-larynx refuses to find a sweet spot (an area on the neck where the sound transfers into the throat). I get more annoyed that she doesn't understand me as I bellow (feels like a bellow, sounds like a whisper) through the din of the electrolarynx "I'm still waiting to hear from Toyota". She looks puzzled "you're wanting to head for Tullow town?" she asks. I feel the voluntary component to the grimace that purses my lips and lifts my eyes to heaven, but don't have the necessary humility to arrest these, so annoyance and exasperation settle in deeper. At last we arrive at the chapel and sit down, Emer with my jacket and Margaret with my bag, Patricia beside me trying not to knock over my tea, Jimmy at a safe distance from my anger and ... blessed silence.

I'm steaming with annoyance and irritation, up tight, miserable. I feel separate from the others – no, I want to be separate from them. My mind huffs: "They don't understand what it's like not to be able to speak easily ... they don't care". Alongside anger and self pity the habit of mindfulness brings some perspective and I begin to feel that sense of separation more objectively, my flesh searing with indignation, shrinking away from the world and clinging to my bones, my breath rapid, my head high and haughty. After a while of acknowledging my internal miseries, and against all my expectations some buried goodwill pushes my attention outwards and it seems that a new source of energy is coming from a point outside me somewhere in the midst of our little group. My flesh still shrinks away, trying to resist, but a flow of goodwill streams into my stomach and heart and gathers at a point in my neck where my voice box used to be. After another while my mind can allow the notion of the others as friends. I'm still pulling back, tense and mistrusting, but aware also of a compassion that surrounds my nonsensical reaction, like a mother cradling a squalling child. My mind forms itself around the source of indignation: 'they don't know what it's like not to be able to speak'. As the meditation goes on I feel more and more the truth of this. They don't know. They can't know. Very slowly I begin to feel both the sadness and the

beauty in that. We are separate beings. They would probably like to be able to share the burden, but what can they do? Stop talking in my presence? I start to make some peace with the practical limitations to human love and care. They don't know and it's OK that they don't know. They have their own troubles to bear, their own devaduttas. And because of this merciful separation of consciousness into separate beings, I am shielded from their troubles. So they chat with lovely melodious tones, they chuckle or laugh out loud. It's OK. For the moment anyhow. In this chapel with its blessed silence.

This is something to be truly grateful for – this mindfulness practice that allows negativity be acknowledged and transformed. Even if I don't feel grateful much of the time, I can trust mindfulness to lead me to a deeper place where that very ingratitude is allowed to be expressed, acknowledged, understood, and when the time is right, released.

With my friends and other sangha to support me in this wonderful practice (nowadays I think of it as the Buddha-dhamma), I can trust the devadutta of laryngectomy to keep leading me to deeper understanding and peace.

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