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## Gratitude: Building Bridges between Buddhism and Positive Psychology

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**Abstract.:** Gratitude is considered as a feeling of appreciation a person receives whether material or immaterial. With gratitude, people acknowledge the goodness in their lives which can also be cultivated by continuous practice. Moreover, The teachings of Buddhism considers gratitude as an spiritual practice to attain the ultimate purpose of life. The field of positive psychology and Buddhism share a common belief on nurturing constructive emotions, personal strengths and virtues. The psychological studies on Buddhism have gradually shown an interest in the area of gratitude and related dimensions in the light of Buddhist teachings. Therefore, present paper draws on centuries of Buddhist teachings and the relevant research done in the area of positive psychology to explore the nature of gratitude and its benefits in everyday life.

**Keywords:** Gratitude, Buddha, Buddhism, Positive Psychology

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### INTRODUCTION

According to Seligman (2011), the field of positive psychology was not formally recognized until 1997 and was seen as of great interest to Buddhist teachings. Initially, the primary focus of Buddhism was on eliminating the causes of suffering as paths to human thriving. However, more recently, the focus of Buddhism has stressed more explicitly the pursuit of happiness incarnated by a positive pattern of thinking. Scholars of modern ethics have also seen happiness and well-being as the core purpose of Buddhist teachings (Keown, 2001). Regardless of religious faith, gratitude is regarded as a significant human attribute. In a similar vein, gratitude in Buddhism refers to a feeling of appreciation or a sense that one should react positively to an act of kindness. The Latin word 'gratita' was derived from psychology; appreciation, which means that it has to do with compassion, kindness, or having anything for nothing (Pruyser, 1976). However, beyond the limits of interpersonal transactions, the contemporary psychological construct of gratitude has expanded, accounting for a sense of gratitude that occurs as a result of any transactional means in response to receiving some kind of personal gain. (Emmons 2007). Moreover, Lord Buddha believes that gratitude is a manifestation of loyalty and is referred to as a sense of affection or a feeling that an act of kindness should be positively responded to by others. Buddha declares gratitude in the Mangala Sutta, the Sutta of Blessings, as one of the greatest blessings and a significant variable of ethical and spiritual teachings (Thero & Wijesinghe, 2008). Psychological studies have also suggested that the sense of gratitude has been interpreted differently (Emmons et al. 2003) as a social and civic virtue, a benevolent motivator, as well as a cognitive and emotional reminder of the social need to achieve a variety of legal, social, and soteriological ends (Berkwitz, 2003). Psychological researches demonstrate gratitude as an act of selflessness towards someone of something that generates longer positivity. Moreover, the sense of appreciation is a gift that is freely offered and respected by others. In this regard, Chah (2007) found that a grateful person promotes peace by a mutual settlement of relations, justice, mutual respect, and is always remembered and cherished. In a study, McCullough et al. (2001) described appreciation as a virtuous emotion with a resemblance to emotions such as empathy and guilt and serve three functions such as a moral barometer, moral motivation, and moral confirmation.

According to Buddha's theology, there are two kinds of individuals in the world that are hard to locate. The one who is first to do a kindness, and the one who is thankful and obliged to return it for a kindness done (Bhikkhu, 2010). To develop spiritual growth, practicing gratitude may create the capacity of forgiveness, bringing clarity of mind (Moffit, 2020). Buddhism also posits gratitude as a mental habit or action that is independent of life circumstances (O'Brien, 2019). Gratitude is often known as either an attribute (dispositional) or a condition (of being). As a trait, as part of their everyday life, a person practices gratitude (McCullough et al. 2002) and can be considered a strength of character which can be developed through practice. Peterson and Seligman (2004). Similarly, Buddha says that being grateful is a sign of spiritual development, and one is in the process of receiving the greatest and most special blessing in life.

According to Theravada Buddhism, the gratitude is denoted as Katannuta and is usually combined with another term Katavedi. Therefore, in this collective form, the term Katannuta is considered a sense of appreciation expressed for the benefits received from someone. On the other hand, Katavedi, is seen as a way of expressing gratitude either verbally or through deeds. Precisely, the word Katannuta comprises of two words (a) Kata, meaning something has been done to oneself, and (b) Katannuta, meaning something that has been done by

others for one's benefit. Hence, to recognize and strive to repay the debt of appreciation the Buddha taught two complementing virtues of *Katannu Katavedi*. In Nichiren Buddhism, all life events in the universe are infinite and inter-related. Nichiren Daishonin states that through our previous life, one can develop ties and owe gratitude to all individuals Daishonin (2020). By acknowledging debts of gratitude, the Buddhist teachings of cultivating gratitude are considered the hallmark of a life of knowledge that comes from overcoming fundamental ignorance (Ikeda, 2009).

In a study, Thu et al (2019) demonstrated the gratefulness of Gautama Buddha was seen after his enlightenment. He expressed his gratitude to the Bodhi's tree that sheltered him during his struggles. Similarly, Buddha posited gratitude as offering assistance, through bodily, verbally, or materially at the time of need. Moreover, in the *Mangala Sutta* scriptures, gratitude is defined as one of the beneficial signs of spiritual growth (Gueco, 2018). Also, Buddhist teachings stress the development of constructive emotions like love, kindness, empathetic joy, harmony, and gratitude (Rinchen, 1997). Furthermore, Theravada Buddhism, those who practice gratitude frequently, also motivate others for Buddhist-inspired activities of developing an appreciation for other (Winzer et al. 2018). Gratitude for one's close ones especially to our friends and teachers has given a special place in the development and expression of gratitude in both Buddhism and positive psychology.

In Buddhism, the first appreciation is to be expressed to our parents for giving us the gift of life through our lives with their unconditional care and love. (Ikeda, 2019). Positive psychology also agrees on this point of expressing thankfulness to our parents and also focuses on the variables that prevent developing the sense of gratitude (Halberstadt et al., 2016). A study conducted in this context showed a higher sense of appreciation between children and mothers (Hoy et al. 2013) and also a higher level of life satisfaction among children. In a recent study, parents with high dispositional gratitude were more likely to have a goal of trying to socialize gratitude among their children (Rothenberg et al., 2017).

Expressing gratitude is also seen to maintain a healthy relationship (Lambert & Fincham, 2011; Algoe et al., 2008; Kubacka et al. 2011) and commitment in relationships over time (Gordon et al. 2012). In an investigation, Gordon et al. (2004) found a significantly higher level of gratitude among female respondents. Moreover, female respondents healthy interpersonal relationships with family, friends, and teachers. According to Buddha's theology, gratitude for one's country and society can not be underestimated. Developing gratitude for one's nation or culture does not imply embracing those in authority unquestioningly. Instead, it means feeling immense compassion for one's nation and the people who live there and courageously trying to bring peace and prosperity to everyone (Bono et al. 2004). Moreover, Gratitude can be described as both a pro-social (Tsang, 2006; Bartlett & DeSteno; 2006) and spiritual behavior which in turn develops forgiveness (Toussaint & Friedman, 2009) well-being (Emmons et al. 2004; Nezlek et al. 2017; Sansone & Sansone, 2010) and happiness (Watkins, 2003; Kashdan et al. 2006).

### **Barriers of gratitude**

Lack of gratitude is seen as the failure to acknowledge both the receipt of favor and the refusal to return the favor or repay it. Just as gratitude is the queen of virtues, the king of vices is ingratitude (Emmons, 2013). A grateful person recognizes that the efforts of many people such as parents, teachers, friends, and so on who have aided in attaining his/her objectives and also sees the inter-related of his/her existence. In contrast, ingratitude is an outgrowth of the arrogant delusion that one is completely detached from other and his/her surroundings. Moreover, arrogance and egotism, and crediting when oneself for whatever has achieved in life by his/her efforts alone may also develop a sense of ingratitude. Those who are ungrateful, forget the help of their benefactors and see only their knowledge and abilities in the present without showing deference or consideration for their benefactors. In a study, Nanasampanno (2015) considers the ungrateful person as a dead-weight on the world with no real progress in life and acts like a dead tree standing with no fruits or leaves to give shade. Moreover, a person lacking gratitude is like an object of disgust for all good fellow human beings and is often disrespected. (Thero & Wijesinghe, 2008) The attitude of blind individualism commonly referred to as egotism, is another barrier to gratitude. In another way, it can be defined as a belief that one is independent of the other, that one is by no means dependent on the other. It owes nothing to anyone and can do anything on one's own. Positive psychotherapy and Buddhism seek to empower the observing "I" over the unrestricted "me." The basic objective of both positive psychotherapy and Buddhism was to re-balance the ego, diminishes self-centeredness by encouraging self-reflection. Both the teachings have different, although related mechanisms. For Freud, free association and the analysis of dreams were the primary methods whereas Buddhism uses mindfulness strategies as the basic principle that draws one away from the insistent self-concern of the immature ego, and in the process strengthens one's composure in the face of incessant change. This turns out to be enormously helpful in dealing with the many indignities life throws at us (Epstein, 2018). In connection with the type of gratitude mentioned by Buddha, people often forget numerous ways in which one's parents, friends, and teachers benefited us. Due to the failure of the benefits of gratitude in the first place, the feeling of appreciation gets vulnerable to fade and forget altogether. In a similar vein, positive psychology focuses on similar factors that act as barriers in expressing gratitude. Both materialism and envy were seen to have a significantly negative

correlation with dispositional gratitude (McCullough et al., 2002) and considered to be an obstruction for people to be grateful for the benefits received. In a similar study, Tsang (2014) observed a negative relationship between materialism and life satisfaction. This indicates that a materialistic person is less happy and satisfied with life. They find it harder to be grateful and often underestimated or lack a sense of appreciation.

### Ways to Cultivate Gratitude

According to the scriptures of Mangala Sutta, appreciation is regarded as one of the auspicious signs of spiritual development. In a similar vein, appreciation is strongly and reliably correlated with greater satisfaction in positive psychology studies. Gratitude allows people to have more positive feelings, appreciate pleasant times, fosters health, cope with adversity and may maintain healthy inter-personal relationships. There are varying ways to feel and express gratitude. People often can relate it to the past (recovering happy childhood memories or blessings from the past), the present (not underestimating benefits when it comes), and the future (maintaining a hopeful and optimistic attitude). Regardless of someone's intrinsic or existing degree of appreciation, it can be efficiently developed. Here are some of how one may establish gratitude.

- **Saying Thank you every morning:** Kornfield, states that Buddhist monks start their morning days with a hymn of gratitude for their life's blessings. This is a simple act of counting the blessings and remembering the simple things like fresh air to breathe, food to eat, a roof overhead, a healthy body, and so on. (Gueco,2018).
- **Countingown Blessings:** Taking the time and counting the blessings each time is one of the ways to cultivate gratitude. One of the most important resources that we humans have to achieve peace of mind and happiness is to be grateful, according to Buddha. It is possible to cultivate gratitude either through a prayer or a meditation of mindfulness. However, it is interesting that the teachings of Buddhism on maintaining gratitude are also shared by Positive psychology. Research conducted by Emmons and McCullough (2003) designed a practice namely "counting blessings" to improve appreciation. The method requires writing down five items that participants were grateful for either daily or weekly (the "counting blessings").
- **Accepting tough challenges:** The practice of gratitude is important because it transforms the mind in such a way that it helps to cope with hardships (Lambert et.2009) and to live a balanced life. Accepting life challenges allows one to face the feeling of scarcity and deprivation, with an open heart. Identification of positive and negative aspects of life is also possible through practicing gratitude.
- **Practicing Mindfulness:** Kornfield (2020) links mindfulness to gratitude. Being conscious, he said, is seeing the world without assumptions as it is. Rather than reacting to it, it is responding to the environment. Gratitude allows us to be completely present and to be attentive to our climate. Positive psychology also posits the salutary benefits of practicing mindfulness operations to cultivate gratitude similarly. As the field of psychology continues to develop and evolve, the introduction of mindfulness into psychological theory and practice has become one fruitful avenue of discovery. Mindfulness is described as the awareness that emerges from deliberately attending to everything that arises in the present moment in an accessible and discerning manner. Significant evidence has been produced by two decades of observational studies supporting the effectiveness of mindfulness-based approaches across a wide spectrum of clinical and non-clinical populations.
- **Daily Prayers:** The most important element in fostering a mind of gratitude is sustaining everyday practice (chanting). Awareness and appreciation go from moment-to-moment. Therefore, a healthy way to reinforce awareness is to set aside some time per day to completely participate in awareness (Ikeda, 2017) and is usually expressed through prayer (Fincham & May 2020). In a study, praying every day also showed higher ratings of gratitude (Lambert et al.2009). There is a prayer in some Buddhist rituals in which one makes a very unique request from the universe: send me obstacles and barriers and the only way to deal with those difficulties is the spiritual practices (Gregoire,2014).

### CONCLUSION

Gratitude is often used in everyday life. However, due to the lack of researches on the premise, it is often underestimated. Despite the multiple benefits of gratitude, it is not widely adopted in practice. In the light of prior studies of Buddhism and positive psychology, the present paper depicted a clearer picture of gratitude and its constructive benefits in the various domains of life. Moreover, the teachings of Buddhism and positive psychology also shared a common opinion on the factors related to gratitude. To sum up, the present study will be helpful to effectively interpret develop gratitude and propose approaches that can encourage gratitude.

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