



Let us appreciate the very moment of life,
wherever we might be.

Awakening to Sanity (letter 16)

Developing gratitude for our life

Dear friend,

When reading this letter you might have just lost your job, you might live a separation, you might read this in prison or with a pending cancer diagnosis – who knows; it is also possible that everything is just fine or even fantastic for you.

Having outlined ten steps to give meaning to our life in my last letter, I now wish to concentrate on the first one: coming to an unemotional assessment of my situation and giving up lamentation. The basic idea is to come to a more balanced way of looking at my life. Is it really as bad as it occasionally seems? Probably not. Is it really as fantastic as it occasionally seems? Probably not. Try to understand why this is probably not the case.

Dharma practice is all about opening our eyes to see what we are not seeing yet; it is about developing a deep and panoramic perspective of life. In order to open our perspective we train in assuming uncommon perspectives. One of those is developing gratitude in the middle of obvious difficulties. The practice of developing gratitude for our life is traditionally called “contemplating our precious human existence”.

If you are reading or hearing these lines, it means that you are fortunate enough to have a contact with the path of Awakening. Among the seven billion human beings on earth not many have been able to establish such a contact and even less are those who make true meaning out of it. One billion people are suffering from famine; many more are struggling for day to day survival in their search for water, food, work, clothes, medical treatment and housing. Many live in fear due to war and terror. More than half of the population of the earth will never reach the age of forty and enormous numbers of people are illiterate.

Of those that live a decent life many are subject to various fundamentalist religious and political belief systems with no access to teachings on a true path to Awakening. If we

compare we have to admit that we have encountered privileged conditions in life. We know how to read and enjoy a degree of freedom that others only dream of; even if life is very tough we actually have the possibility to engage in free and meaningful spiritual practice.

Now, let's open the perspective even wider: if you've managed to read these lines up to here it means that you are not completely submerged by hellish suffering; it means that in spite of all your fears and struggles you have a little space to reflect; it means that you are willing to consider new perspectives and that you have not been completely absorbed by material ambitions and the search for short-lived happiness. It also means that you are not dependent on exciting input all the time and that you are able and willing to reflect.

If you haven't stopped reading yet, it means that you are able to dedicate five minutes from time to time to a deeper reflection on life, something which your dog is probably not interested or able to do. In this very instant we are indeed human beings with our capacity of deeper self reflection, and we are using it! A la la ho – this is already a reason to rejoice!

We can feel gratitude to be human beings who possess those basic qualities of being able to differentiate between harmful and beneficial acts, true and false statements, love and self interest... These basic capacities allow for a path of liberation. We are able to use our mind – the capacities of feeling, reflecting, reasoning, discernment and intuition. We are able to build on experience and grow in understanding and love. This is marvellous! Most of the time we simply take all of that for granted, but please reflect for a moment on how many humans and other sentient beings are not able to make use of these faculties. We are very fortunate!

But this is not all. We can develop and maintain an interest in things of importance; we have a sufficient motivation and willpower to follow through with a course of action. We can actually take decisions about what we want to do, and then apply those decisions. This is exactly what is needed for the path of Awakening. We need to be full human beings with all these faculties at our disposition.

And now let's have a look at the more difficult sides of life: the various types of suffering that we are going through in growing up, taking care of a body, living together with others and so on. Well, exactly these unwanted sufferings are what make us less proud and more aware; they are challenges to open our heart and understanding. Without suffering, would we be motivated at all to search for a path of liberation and awakening? Would we be motivated to act respectfully and to discipline our mind? Probably not! So let's develop gratitude for those challenges in life that allow us to soften, open up and progress. Yes, let us appreciate them!

Some of the good conditions that we encounter depend on us, they are the result of how we have lived our lives up to now. If we have taken good care of ourselves and others then obviously it will be easier to engage in a practice of Awakening – since our mind is already attuned to what is beneficial. If we have not taken good care of ourselves and others we will find it more difficult and will have to make additional efforts to channel our wild mind into wholesome practices.

Some of the conditions that make a path of Awakening possible are environmental or social. For example it is very difficult to make any contact with such teachings if we are born into surroundings that do not allow for free religious practice. The possibility for dharma contact depends on our society, family, friends, and nowadays also on free internet access. This is also why I decided to put an effort into internet communication: it can reach into the furthest corners of the planet as long as someone translates the texts!

Some of the good conditions for dharma practice directly depend on the efforts of others. The fact that a dharma teacher is able to communicate the dharma today and that we are able to hear it is actually the result of whole generations of dharma practitioners engaged in the path of Awakening who kept it alive for future generations. This lineage of compassionate heart to heart transmission goes back to teachers like Buddha Shakyamuni and even further. It is maybe the greatest of the wonders of the world that such long successions of human beings have communicated their precious experiences of Awakening from seniors to juniors and that this heritage is accessible to us today. That is another very important reason to rejoice!

We can rejoice that we are born into a time where the dharma is accessible and that we do not live in dark ages of tyranny and ignorance. We can rejoice that some spiritual teachers exist that are worthy examples of the path. We can rejoice that we are able to receive and understand their teachings. We can rejoice in our own motivation to go the path, as shaky as that motivation might be! We can rejoice that we feel some trust in the teachings on Awakening. We can rejoice that other people help us on the path. All of this should not be taken for granted, since it depends on many causes and conditions that do not come together easily. The Indian Master Shantideva wrote:

*“It is difficult to become a human being,
It is difficult to stay alive as a human,
It is difficult to receive such a noble teaching,
And it is difficult to find a completely Awakened One!”*

And we can add from the Lotus sutra:

*“True interest in the wholesome is very rare
And even rarer is genuine practice.”*

So let us rejoice in this precious opportunity to reach Awakening which is at our disposition – this present life. If we make good use of this life we will go towards happiness, liberation and Awakening for the benefit of all – and what else really counts at the end of this life?

With the best wishes for appreciating the challenges and opportunities of life,

Tilman Lhundrup

(with some help by Andy)

PS. If you would like to know more about appreciating this “precious human existence” you might want to look at chapter 2 of Gampopa’s “Ornament of Liberation”.