Gratitude: A Natural State of the Open Heart

An Interview with Eugene Cash by Beth Hamlet for SFI Sangha News

Sangha News spoke with Eugene Cash around the first anniversary of his nearly fatal bicycle accident to discuss our winter theme, Gratitude. As those familiar with Eugene’s speaking style might imagine, the conversation ventured into unexpected territory, with results that prove delightfully insightful and mysterious.

Sangha News (SN): In an article titled “Selfless Gratitude,” Phillip Moffitt wrote: “...gratitude is the sweetest of all the practices for living the dharma in daily life and the most easily cultivated, requiring the least sacrifice for what is gained in return.” I’m curious to know how you respond to this observation.

Eugene Cash (EC): I don’t think of gratitude so much as a practice, but rather one of the positive effects of mindfulness. For me, gratitude is about recognizing how much is given, and one of the benefits of waking up is that one is awake to the abundance of all that is given. Practice clarifies the heart and when the heart is lucid, one sees the reality of what is being given—our bodies, our lives, the time and place we live in—we have so much. Gratitude is a natural response of an awakened, open heart and in that way practice nourishes and generates gratitude. I agree that one can have a specific gratitude practice and that is a good thing to do, but it is secondary to mindfulness and insight practice.

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Inside This Issue:

We explore gratitude and all that we are grateful for including poetry, music, family, friends and our very lives. May our practice awaken our gratitude to the abundance of this life.
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Sarah Anderson ........................................ Editor
Beth Hamlet ............................................ Editor
Lonnie Lazar ............................................ Editor
Jill Morrison ............................................ Graphic Designer
Kitty Costello ........................................ Consulting Editor
Geoff McNally ........................................ Proofreader

Contact SFI

website:  www.sfinsight.org
online sangha:  groups.yahoo.com/group/SFIInsight
voice mail:  415–994–5951
snail mail:  P.O. Box 475536, SF, CA 94147–5536
SN: Two years ago you gave a dharma talk to SFI which you called your Thanksgiving talk. You said, "...gratitude is key to Buddhist understanding and considered one of the beautiful states of heart and mind." What Buddhist teachings does the experience of gratitude point us towards?

EC: Gratitude points us to Buddhist principles like compassion and non-separateness. When there is heartfelt gratitude there is an awareness of reality. There are dharma principles in play when one expresses gratitude about anything such as their family, partner, work or poetry. However, people are also grateful for their beer, their heroin or that we killed a million people yesterday and they didn’t kill us. So you want to keep paying attention. It isn’t like being grateful means everything is good.

SN: During that same talk, you also said, "...when we are in a state of gratitude, we’re in touch with the numinous, the divine or that which is awake within us.” I wonder if you can expand on this impression.

EC: I love the word gratitude. It comes from the Latin “gratus” meaning “to praise” which is a beautiful understanding. The first time I gave a dharma talk on gratitude was about five years after I had started teaching. I was at a retreat with Jack [Kornfield] and many other teachers in Yucca Valley. During that week, Allen Ginsberg died and I wanted to talk about him because his poetry and the way he lived had a big impact on me. I met Allen in 1967 at the Human Be-In and then saw him many times afterwards. I had been a musician and around beatniks and hippies, so I knew that whole scene that Allen had been part of and it was personal to me. The poem “Howl” touched me in particular because it showed that Allen was unafraid to be real, honest and himself. He didn’t hold back, hide or wait to come out; he was just himself. He trusted and delighted in who he was and knew it was good. What a beautiful example!

I gave a talk on gratefulness which everyone could relate to because it wasn’t just about Allen, but really
about being moved by someone’s work or presence. It was a great talk because it was totally real and it was my voice coming through as a dharma teacher. It resonated with the sangha and I was told that my talk got more responses on Dharma Seed’s tape library than had happened in a long time.

It showed me that I knew something not just from my Buddhist understanding, but also from my life understanding. After that, I really started to come forward more as myself in my teaching, which is what Allen did. He modeled fearlessness and enjoyment in being oneself which helped awaken those qualities in me. The experience clarified my path and my voice as a teacher and I was grateful for the freedom to be myself in the dharma seat in that way.

SN: It is interesting that you bring up Allen Ginsberg because in preparation for the SFI newsletter, we asked members of our sangha what they were grateful for. Many mentioned poetry, art and music. Thomas Merton once said: “Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time.” What do you think about the sangha’s responses and does it have anything to do with Merton’s observation?

EC: It is important what you are hearing as it points to what is meaningful and what is numinous, sacred, extraordinary or mystical. Art touches us, takes us beyond ourselves and we are grateful for being touched. The arts are a doorway to the heart and mind like dharma is the doorway to the heart and mind, to reality. The arts are so beautiful because they are human, but more than that, they become a conduit for the numinous and point us beyond the usual understanding of reality and of ourselves.

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SN: Let’s talk a little bit about teachers. At Spirit Rock Meditation Center there is the Gratitude Hut (Katannuta in Pali) which displays pictures of Buddhist teachers affiliated with Spirit Rock or those who have had an impact on teachers/staff members. Is it common Buddhist practice to show gratitude for teachers and the teachings?

EC: It is definitely common to have gratitude for one’s teachers. There is even a Zen practice where they recite the whole lineage all the way to the Buddha. This points at something about the reality of our human lineage and our gratitude for the work and difficulty that our teachers have gone through to bring us the dharma. I’m grateful to all my teachers: Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield and Hameed Ali to name a few. They have had a big impact on my life and in fact, changed my life totally. I’m grateful for the wisdom that they cultivated and the love, devotion and the dedication to the dharma that they express with their teaching.

However, my gratitude doesn’t end with teachers from the dharma community. For example, Gordie Howe was a hockey player for the Detroit Red Wings when I was a kid. He was a fantastic player, maybe one of the greatest of all time. I met him once when I was 12. I was working at the Michigan State Fair selling pork pie hats and kewpie dolls for my uncle. All of a sudden, I looked up and there was Gordie Howe and his wife and kids. I couldn’t believe it and was so excited that I called out, “Gordie Howe!” and I tipped backwards off my chair! He waited while I picked myself up and talked to me for 10-15 minutes. He was so gracious and kind. He could have just walked away, but he didn’t and I will (continued on page 7)
Haiku

A bite of apple
Golden leaves crunch under boots
Autumn heat turns cool.

—Sarah Anderson

Walk as if you are kissing the Earth with your feet.

—Thich Nhat Hanh
I used to feel waking up was like being born: the shock of meeting a world already alive and in motion. So often I was ambivalent, not ready or willing to let go of the womb of sleep. I’d choke on the first slap of reality, morning air filling morning lungs, my brain not quite registering the miracle.

How do I keep forgetting this miracle?

For several years I’ve had a morning meditation ritual. I sit up, cross my legs into a lotus. Unfold my spine upright, reminding myself not to be too rigid. Instinctively, I grab my morning meditation book, as if still looking through amniotic fluid. Shapes blur as I try to make out the small type without my glasses. I know that four letter word is “Love.” I know that blurry squiggle is “Gratitude.” I remember the aphorisms without actually reading them and I know I can choose to accept or reject their wisdom.

But some mornings—this morning—it takes more; I need a little more space to become fully human. This morning, muscles tense and my mind grinds on yesterday’s disappointments, grist for today’s mill. Today I carry on in my head a disagreement with someone I used to believe I loved—someone who continues to support me financially. Today I pick up the argument as if I had not already gnawed this bone clean, proud that I can make more points without the other person present.

This is not sitting.

I tell myself this, ready to uncross my legs in favor of breakfast and starting my day without a full twenty minutes of meditation.

This is exactly sitting.

Wise mind rescues me and the “me” who actually plays both roles in the mental drama begins to take a back seat. I watch my mind do what my mind does, what all minds do despite years of therapy, yoga, and, more recently, practice.

This is exactly sitting—and the breath becomes more present than the virtual argument I am witnessing. My exhales become louder than the bitter words. My well-intentioned wrangling starts to fade, as if I were eavesdropping on someone else’s conversation. The light in my room grows brighter, as time and thoughts pass. I am born into this morning, a little bit clearer for having taken the time to evolve.

As I pull on some old grey sweats that have been waiting for me in a pile on the floor, I consider what it is to be human, to become human. Maybe waking up isn’t like being born. Maybe it’s more like evolving, a personal evolution from slime to fish to amphibian to reptile to just a whisper of what it could be like to be Homo erectus, Homo sapien. Maybe I just barely grow a backbone when I first sit up for my morning meditation and give up gills for lungs as I get lost in my own breath. Maybe I shed my scaly skin just as I remember I am not my thoughts.

I am grateful if some mornings, like this one, I no longer have a tail as I make way down my black steel spiral staircase, standing upright, ready to live this day as a human being on Earth. 😊
never forget that kindness. So gratitude to teachers is the natural response to someone who awakens something in us; it is just the humanness of us.

SN: A lot of people told us that they are grateful for you as a teacher. Can you offer some thoughts on what it is like to receive someone’s gratitude?

EC: It is really a certain kind of perception of reality. I don’t take it personally because what I am highlighting as a teacher is the dharma which each of us finds for ourselves. So gratitude for me becomes a shared gratitude for the dharma.

It’s like this—I’m grateful for my dharma teachers and for the Buddha. I’m also grateful to Ikkyu who was a rebel Zen monk because I could relate to him as well as Ryokan a Zen teacher and poet from the 1800s. Ryokan in particular had such an impact on me because his poetry is so moving and his humanness is so beautiful. Do I know them? Totally! No and totally. I don’t take people’s gratitude for me personally; I take it as the dharma doing its thing and I’m happy to be a part of that. I’m glad to be on both sides of it, teacher/student.

SN: In closing—what are you grateful for?

EC: I’m really grateful to be alive—really—because it won’t be that way forever. I may be grateful for death when that happens, but it is totally wild to be here now.
What Are You Grateful For?

I am grateful for gratitude. I am so grateful that such a simple thing changes my life in such profound ways. I am grateful that I can practice it and, as though by magic, my life changes. The love in my life is magnified and the frustrations are vastly overshadowed by the immensity of all my blessings. Every night I write down three things for which I am grateful and as I do this, I literally feel my heart expand as it is pumped full of more joy and love, more awe and wonder. It supports my relationships because as I continually count friends as blessing, this gratitude practice highlights the people who make my life more bountiful. The practice also directs my actions because it reminds me to feed those friendships, or to do more of those activities that filled me with such joy. It helps my self-esteem because I can choose to be grateful for those parts of me others don’t even know about, or that the world implicitly suggests I hide under a bushel. Instead, I can be grateful for the parts of me that allow me to feel deeply, to love hard, and to be different. Gratitude makes one walk in abundance because it shines the biggest, brightest light on all that we have, all that we are. Lack becomes nothing. This is why I am grateful for gratitude.

—Mellody Hayes

Sunshine in the backyard and time to enjoy it.

—Alicia Chazen

I feel deep gratitude and inner joy for being so fortunate as to have Eugene as my dharma teacher and to be able to benefit from his wisdom and knowledge which has illuminated and guided me in my life for the last seven years. I also have gratitude to my sangha which has been my refuge.

—Mahin Charles

The Giants winning the world series

—Anonymous

My dog Sam. He is always happy to see me regardless of my mood, waistline or relationship status.

—Anonymous

Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich, Robert Frost, William Blake, Billy Collins, Rainer Maria Rilke, Langston Hughes, Walt Whitman and Gary Snyder.

—Anonymous

Living in San Francisco and enjoying all of the Dharma avenues available here!

—Anonymous

My family, friends and teachers.

—Anonymous

SFI Mission Statement

The mission of SFI is to encourage the awakening of wisdom and compassion in all aspects of life, through the practice of mindfulness, the study of the Buddha’s teachings, and the cultivation of a supportive community of practitioners where all can take refuge in the three jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.
Retreat Poem: Day 3

Step step step
Dharma truth
Here, now, this—
I’ve landed.

This moment, the next
Body, breath, heart, mind.

I like this moment. Beautiful.
Prefer it to my stories, thoughts,
images, wishes, plans.
Let go of clinging and aversion.

A past beautiful moment is simply
past. Gone. Ephemeral.
I wanted to string beautiful moments together—
I can’t. The string breaks.

Here, now, this.

This moment, the next, that one,
Even truth doesn’t stand still.
Go deep. Uncapturable.

This moment is the truth of what is.

Step step step
Wide attention narrows. Words pour through,
Try to write, capture something:
25 hours of meditation practice,
Receptivity grows.

Then a walking moment,
Truth opens, no searching.
It’s right there, it’s been there
Opening up.

Helpless, waiting, aware of suffering.
Then, illumination
Stepping off the wheel
for just a moment.

Step step step
—Cheryl Jacques

Gratitude is confidence in life itself. In it, we feel how
the same force that pushes grass through cracks in the
sidewalk invigorates our own life.

—Jack Kornfield

Haiku

What is my mind like?
An open window at night
Lets in moths and moons.

—Sarah Anderson
What is Vipassana Meditation?

At SFI we practice a style of meditation known as Vipassana, or insight meditation, which has been practiced in Asia for over 2,500 years. Often translated as “mindfulness,” Vipassana implies seeing deeply or clearly, penetrating and illuminating reality. Cultivating awareness of breath, body, and the processes of heart and mind, Vipassana offers insight into the nature of reality and a way to radically transform our understanding of and engagement with our lives.

Buddhist Army Knife

By Janelle Case

I have a Swiss Army knife, a Victorinox Adventurer Lock Blade. There’s one blade and a bunch of special tools. The best tool is the lockback button; it lets you use the blade without fear of it snapping down on your fingers. My knife got me through a couple of Outward Bound courses. It was always there, if and when I needed it. I’m very grateful for it, but I have it tucked away somewhere.

I think of my Buddhist meditation techniques as tools on a Swiss Army knife: they’re there when I need them—walking meditation on the way to the bus, breathing in the grocery checkout line, metta while the Web is loading. A little meditation at a time works better for me than long stretches. Of course, I have to remember to use them!

If I’m lucky, when I’m stressed, depressed, angry, scared or confused, simply treading water in my emotions, I’ll think just clearly enough to remember, “Wait, I’ve got tools!” Then a bit of breathing can help shift me back toward balance, think more clearly, and make better decisions. And I remind myself to use those tools for next time.

Yes, I’m very grateful for my Buddhist army knife. Now, if I could just find my Adventurer Lock Blade.
One thing that comes out of myths is that at the bottom of the abyss comes the voice of salvation. The black moment is the moment when the real message of transformation is going to come. At the darkest moment comes the light.

—Joseph Campbell

Buddhist Lineage of SFI

After his death, the Buddha's teachings spread from India throughout Asia. Three main schools of Buddhism thrive in Asia today: the Theravada flourishes in Thailand, Burma and Sri Lanka; the Mahayana characterizes traditions within China, Korea and Japan; and the Vajrayana exists mainly in Tibet and Bhutan. As part of the larger Spirit Rock Meditation Center community in the West, SFI draws primarily from the practices and teachings of the Theravada lineage, specifically of the Thai Forest Tradition, but is also influenced by the other Buddhist traditions.
Thanksgiving

My eyes are drenched
and don't go looking
Color and shape arrive
dance me alive

Ears need no tuning
All of life comes, crooning

My palms are petals catching dew
My heart is an upturned vase
catching open space

Luscious moment
breathing me here
refreshed, sustaining
then gently waning

Vibrant rebirth
moment and place
married and coupling
arise and embrace
relish each taste
saturate, sustain
decline
erase

So cook me in this stew
Dissolve me in the tide anew

Hallowed be the emergent now
Sanctify in a deepening bow.

—Kitty Costello

Haiku

I rest my body
Round cushion sinking beneath
Two eyes close and see.

—Sarah Anderson

When we feel true gratitude, whether toward particular people or toward life, metta will flow from us naturally.
When we connect with another person through gratitude, the barriers that separate begin to melt.

—Joseph Goldstein
Classes and Retreats

Intermediate Mindfulness Meditation
With Rebecca Katz & Trip Weil
Five Thursday evenings from 7–9 p.m.
March 7–April 4 (also includes a daylong retreat on Saturday, March 23, from 9:30 a.m.–5 p.m.)
This class will offer a deepening exploration of the practice of Insight Meditation. We will explore the Buddha’s teachings on awareness of body, emotions, thoughts, and awareness itself. A strong emphasis will be placed on recognizing and dwelling in the natural awareness that lies at the heart of all experience. This class is intended for those who have an established meditation practice and are looking to deepen their practice in a group context. Each session will include guided meditation instruction, talks on the Buddha’s teachings, and time for questions and dialogue to explore the application of the teachings and practice in the participants’ daily lives and experiences. Attending the Beginning Mindfulness Meditation class first is encouraged but not required. People of all ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and gender identities are welcome.
For details, visit www.sfinsight.org

Buddhist Mindfulness Meditation Daylong Retreat
With Rebecca Katz & Trip Weil
Saturday, March 23 from 9:30 a.m.–5 p.m.
This daylong retreat is part of the five-week Intermediate-Level Mindfulness Meditation class starting on March 7. The cost for this one-day retreat is included as part of the class. However, if you are not taking the whole class, you may still attend this one-day retreat. This daylong is appropriate for all who wish to deepen their practice in a group context. People of all ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and gender identities are welcome
For details, visit www.sfinsight.org.

About the Teachers
Rebecca Katz has been practicing Buddhist meditation since 2003. She recently completed the Community Dharma Leader Program at Spirit Rock. A family physician, Rebecca teaches meditation classes at her clinic in Sonoma County.

Trip Weil has been practicing Buddhist meditation since 2004. He is a graduate of Spirit Rock’s Community Dharma Leader and Dedicated Practitioners Programs. Formerly an attorney, Trip is a psychotherapist in private practice in San Francisco.

The Three Refuges: Where do we Find Peace in Difficult Times?
With Marlena de Carion April 4–25
For Information, call 415 994 5951

The Four Primary Elements: A Daylong
With Bob Stahl April 6
For Information, call 415 994 5951

All SFI classes are located in the First Unitarian Universalist Church (UU), on the corner of Franklin and Geary (1187 Franklin) in San Francisco, unless otherwise noted.
For details, visit www.sfinsight.org
Eugene Cash
Eugene is the founding teacher of the San Francisco Insight Meditation Community of San Francisco. He teaches at Spirit Rock Meditation Center and leads intensive meditation retreats internationally. His teaching is influenced by both Burmese and Thai streams of the Theravada tradition as well as Zen and Tibetan Buddhist practice. He is also a teacher of the Diamond Approach, a school of spiritual investigation and self-realization developed by A. H. Almaas.

Pamela Weiss
Pamela has been practicing Buddhism since 1987, including several years of Zen monastic training. She recently graduated from teacher training with Jack Kornfield and is also a student of the Diamond Approach. Pamela is an executive coach who offers mindfulness classes and leadership development programs inside organizations. Her passion is in bringing the richness and depth of Buddhist teachings to the world of work and relationships, as well as articulating a feminine expression of the dharma.

If you can just appreciate each thing, one by one, then you will have pure gratitude.
—Shunryu Suzuki Roshi
**Anushka Fernandopulle**

Anushka has trained in the Theravada Buddhist tradition for over 20 years in the U.S. and Asia. Other influences have been mystics from various cultures and traditions, creative arts, nature, service work, progressive social change movements and modern urban life. Anushka teaches retreats at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, Insight Meditation Society, and around the country. She has an MBA and works as an organizational development consultant and executive/life coach.

[www.anushkaf.org](http://www.anushkaf.org)

**Will Kabat-Zinn**

Will has practiced Vipassana meditation intensively in the U.S. and in Burma and teaches regularly at Spirit Rock Meditation Center and The California Institute for Integral Studies. Will has taught meditation and awareness practices to incarcerated youth since 2001. He is a graduate of the teacher training program with Jack Kornfield and also works as a Marriage and Family Therapist intern in private practice.

**Martina Schneider**

Martina has been a student of the Dharma since 1996. She has studied and practiced Vipassana meditation in the U.S., India and in Burma, where she was ordained as a nun. Martina also completed teacher training with Jack Kornfield. She combines her practice with social engagement and has worked extensively with homeless and underrepresented populations, counseled incarcerated people and volunteered with the Zen Hospice Project. Martina combines mindfulness practices and psychotherapy in her work as a Marriage and Family Therapist.

[www.martinaschneider.com](http://www.martinaschneider.com)
San Francisco Insight (SFI) is dedicated to offering the teachings of the Buddha as they develop in the West. Our specific orientation is toward intensive householder (lay) practice. We offer weekly group meditations and dharma talks (lectures), plus classes, meditation retreats, and other events as a community of spirit devoted to the embodiment of awakening in our lives.

Our Weekly Meetings
Our sangha meets Sundays and Wednesdays from 7–9 p.m. at the First Unitarian Universalist Church, 1187 Franklin (at Geary). Each meeting begins with a meditation, followed by a dharma talk and discussion. To allow us to pay rent to the UU Church, make an offering to the teacher, and cover other expenses, we ask attendees for a donation; whatever you can give is greatly appreciated. If writing a check, make it out to SFI.

Beginning Orientation
Second Sunday of the month, 6 p.m.
A brief introduction to Vipassana meditation and our sangha, led by a senior student.

Vegetarian Potluck
First Sunday of the month, 5:30 p.m.
Socialize informally with your dhamma friends. Homemade and store-bought dishes welcome.

Chi Gung and Yoga
All Sundays except first, 6:15–6:45 p.m.
Pre-sit gentle movement practice to enliven and settle energy flow. No experience required.

Seeking a Volunteer Teacher
Are you a chi gung or yoga teacher, willing to help with offering mindful movement practice before Sunday night sits? Please contact kittycostello@earthlink.net.

Dana Practice
Dana means "generosity." The Buddha’s teachings are considered priceless but traditionally are given freely in a spirit of generosity. Offering dana (a donation) gives students an opportunity to express their gratitude for the teachings and to cultivate the joy of giving. Most SFI retreats and classes are taught by dana.

Kalyana Mitta Groups
Kalyana mitta means "spiritual friends." These small groups (typically 6 to 12 people) meet regularly to study and share experiences in support of each other’s practice. Meetings usually include a short meditation and discussion. For more info, contact Ed Ritger at kminfo@sfinsight.org.

Other Ways To Get Involved
Sangha members often engage in outside activities and service projects. Past activities have included homeless outreach; fundraising projects for an AIDS-related community outreach program founded by Buddhist friends in South Africa; the compilation and sale of sangha cookbooks to raise money; picnics in Golden Gate Park; and bike rides. To learn more, visit www.sfinsight.org or our Yahoo Group (groups.yahoo.com/group/SFInsight).

Got a dharma story, poem or work of art?
To contribute to Sangha News, email sfisanghanews@gmail.com.