

The Meaning of “Arigatai”

Japanese Buddhism is rich with wonderful words and expressions that are hard to translate into English. Words like *Okagesama*, thanks to others, or *mottainai*, which can mean “don’t waste,” are hard to truly translate. There is something lost in translation.

There is another beautiful expression that I would like to share and explain today. It is the word, “Arigatai.” *Arigatai* literally means “hard to exist,” or “hard to be,” as in “rare” or “wondrous.” Buddhism is pointing to the “rare” and the “wondrous” in our lives that we do not see, or take for granted.

The first thing that is rare and wondrous, is life itself. We all know that to win the lottery, the odds of winning are astronomically difficult. Something like 300 million to one. Not one in a million. 300 million to one. Sometimes I wonder why I buy a ticket when the jackpot gets really big, but I dream of hitting the lottery just like everyone else.

Did you ever think about the odds of you being born into this world? Buddhism describes it this way. Imagine that out in the vast Pacific ocean, there is one particular sea turtle. This sea turtle comes to the surface only once in a hundred years. Imagine also, that on the surface of the vast, Pacific ocean, there is one particular piece of driftwood, that has a knot hole in it. Buddhism says that the odds of our being born into this world is compared to the following: What if this one particular sea turtle, when it surfaces once in a hundred years, just happens to hit that one particular piece of driftwood floating out on that vast ocean, AND if it also happens to poke its head through the knothole of that piece of driftwood, those are the odds of us being born into this world. Makes hitting the lottery of 300 million to one an even better bet doesn’t it?

But think about it. We all know that we have been born from our parents. And our parents have parents so we have four grandparents, and they have parents, so we have eight great grandparents. According to the Japanese poet, Mitsuo Aida, if you count back 10 generations, there are 1024 people directly responsible for you coming into this world. If you count back 20 generations, that number becomes over one million people. I think in math it is called exponential, or something like that. It is 2, to the power of 20. Each generation the number doubles. Two parents, four grandparents, eight great grandparents, and on and on. 20 generations before us, that adds up to over one million people.

To have been born into this world is *arigatai*, it is the most rare and wondrous thing that could happen.

The second thing that Buddhism tries to awaken us to, that is rare and wondrous, is to encounter the Dharma, to meet with the teachings. That too, we take for granted, just like our life. This pandemic that we are going through, has positive sides to it, believe it or not. Don’t we all miss just going to the temple, attending a service, listening to a Dharma talk, seeing all of our friends, having a cup of coffee and a donut after service? Doesn’t it seem like eons ago? Now that we cannot meet, we really appreciate what we had. Now, we have to find new ways to listen to the Dharma, through the internet, reading books, or by calling the Dial the Dharma toll free number.

To encounter Buddhism is just as *arigatai*, rare and wondrous, as having been born as a human being. It took 2500 years for the Dharma to reach our shores. The Dharma has been transmitted by land and by sea, by countless individuals before us. Now we have to go into the teachings deeply, receive them into our hearts and minds, and then transmit them for future generations. *Arigatai, arigatai, arigatai.*

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