

# In Gratitude: Robert W. Gunn, 1947–2008

AT 5:30 IN THE MORNING ON APRIL 22, Bob Gunn's alarm went off. That wasn't unusual. But it was odd that he failed to shut it off. His wife, Brook, turned to rouse him. She could not. At some time during the night, Bob had died.

At 5:30 the previous evening, Bob had e-mailed to me his most recent additions to a column for this magazine. In it, he returned to a theme that had informed his dedicated effort to continue to become a better human being: how to vanquish his ego—the habits of thinking that cause so much suffering—and to a Buddhist text that had inspired him over and over again on his spiritual journey.

Along that journey, we both were humbled when we heard that something in these columns had reached you, our readers, such as these recent letters:

*"I found particular enjoyment in your article, 'One Hundred.' Whenever we think that we are the only ones going through these various emotions, an article like yours comes to us, and we realize we are not alone..."*—J.G., Michigan

*"...I have been struggling with how to better balance life and work. Your*



He was generous  
with his  
experience,  
his mind, and  
his heart.

*articles on Buddhism and meditation have inspired me, and seeing them written in a magazine like Strategic Finance gives me hope for the profession as a whole. Perhaps we will all come to realize that endless hours in the office are not the only path to success."*—K.B., Canada

*"Whether it be your articles on*

*time, anger, patience, thought, courage, or, more recently, candor (to name a few), the consistency of your underlying principles has certainly awakened in me a spirit of inquiry. As I come from the land of Vedas and Upanishads, the hymns you use to describe daily life situations only reverberate louder....Reading about the vedic hymns that are often recited by pundits here on auspicious occasions and that, too, [are cited] by Americans writing articles on workplace effectiveness for a leading professional journal only further opened my eyes to the universality of these principles..."*—R.V., India

Bob was one of the most alive individuals I've known. As he comes to my mind, there's a twinkle in his eye—he's one inch away from laughing. He was generous with his experience, his mind, and his heart. I started to write that the world is poorer because Bob is no longer in it. But he was a "glass half full" person. So I say, instead, that my world, and that of so many others, is richer because of Bob Gunn. I am especially grateful that his voice remains in the writings in which I have been privileged to be a partner. ■

—Betsy Raskin Gullickson

Bob Gunn, Editor

# Quid Pro What?

BY ROBERT W. GUNN

Judy is a masterful accountant, but she can't add a column of figures to save her life. The books Judy keeps are in her head. Each entry in her credit column is something she does for another person—fulfilling a request, doing a favor, giving a present, picking up the check.

Conversely, each debit is something the other person does for her. To be around Judy is to be battered by the constant sound of mental keys clacking as Judy keeps track of the *quid pro quo*.

Her relationships are built on reciprocity. It's a principle that oils many human interactions. Consider, for example, hostess gifts, usually a casual hand-off of flowers or a bottle of wine when arriving for a dinner party. To the Japanese, such presents embody a deep-seated system of reciprocity that embraces the virtually untranslatable terms *on*, *gimu*, and *giri*. It's simply understood that there are things one is expected to do—either in response to a specific request from a superior or because of an internal sense of knowing where one ranks in the hierarchy. Included is the absolute obligation to repay all debts. That's

why, instead of eliciting a joyful response when you give something to a Japanese associate, you may be adding to his or her stress—burdening that person with an *on*, the need to repay a debt with the most subtle understanding of the state of the relationship.

This points to the fundamental problem with reciprocity: It's a slippery slope into the fretful land of expectation. Judy's books are in her head; she assigns the market value to each act, and she judges what a fair return is. Obviously, a six-pack of Budweiser doesn't cost as much as a bottle of Dom Pérignon. But is an introduction to a new business prospect the equivalent of brokering a job interview? Does lending expertise “pay back” finding a college student an internship? Judy is constantly making those calculations—and expecting her

friends, family, and associates to tacitly share her assumptions of “market value.”

Reciprocity is neither good nor bad, but it can take as much as it gives and ruffle as many feathers as it soothes. That's because it depends upon the thoughts of individuals—which, inevitably, are difficult to synch up. After all, how can we ever see exactly what someone else is thinking? It's so easy for the books to be out of balance. One person's “nothing” is another person's “something.”

Reciprocity is so often mistaken for something else: loyalty. For example, I sympathized with an executive who worried about losing staff when new management stripped him of the authority to deliver certain perks. But that doesn't rise to the level of loyalty, which I came to see as a values-based commitment that transcends self-interest.

Reciprocity is also mistaken for generosity. Generosity is when we give freely, openheartedly. It is the one-way street named “kindness”—simple acts of munificence, of offering a helping hand. Judy would tell you that she's a very giving person;

*“Whenever there is attachment in my mind and  
whenever there is the desire to be angry,  
I should not do or say anything, But remain  
like a piece of wood.”*

- *Shantideva*, The Bodhisattva Way of Life, c. 800 A.D.

indeed, she can reel off a long list of favors done for others. But when they don't give back what she expects, she's quick to be critical. Her disappointments have led to a series of blow-ups, damaging her relationships and her business.

Once we identify such interactions as a dynamic of thinking, we know what to do. First, don't feed the negativity. Refrain from those self-justifying, blaming thoughts that inflame the situation. Take a deep breath. As your emotions begin to calm down, examine what lies beneath.

When the mental turbulence clears, what swims into view are our assumptions, beliefs, and expectations. Reflecting on what we see, we note how concrete our assumptions have become—how easy it is for someone to unwittingly trigger our anger or disappointment, for instance, as we spend emotional and mental energy to keep the “giving and receiving” books balanced.

If you are brave enough, ask others what they notice about your behavior. Listen as if they are talking about someone else. Put aside the normal mental filters held in place by insecurities: taking things personally, hearing blame and feeling guilt, judging right vs. wrong, worrying, etc. You may be surprised by how clearly others see your patterns,

and you might even be more shocked to discover the methods they resort to so that they can “work around” your system.

Please take this feedback without blame. The underlying point is that all humans tend to get hooked or triggered by deeply held thoughts that become our hot buttons—those rules that govern our lives in ways we may not even be aware of.

When Buddhists use the word “attachment,” that's what they're pointing to. We grab the thought so tightly, we can't let go. Judy's beliefs about reciprocity, for example, led her to hold grudges and feel unappreciated. It made her work harder so that recipients would notice and repay her “kindness.” Her attachment led directly to great suffering because she was so distracted, even consumed, by keeping track of what she was owed that she stopped living moment to moment.

Emotions are powerful. The antidote when we get triggered is simply to keep enough presence of mind to note that we are caught. Instead of *doing* something—such as firing off an e-mail—we relax, knowing that our thoughts continually arise, abide for a time, and dissipate. We lie like a log in the woods: unmoving. In this state, our thinking calms down. Our mind quiets, and the thoughts that have hooked us pass.

As part of my ongoing effort at self-improvement, I've been practicing insight meditation. This practice helps us hold any thought habit—worry is my personal favorite—lightly, putting it in the back of our minds as we meditate. We simply see what comes up. The Aha! moments begin to give us some wisdom about how we unwittingly torture ourselves.

Meditation also helps us see the impermanent nature of all thoughts. Unless, that is, we grab them by adding judgment, opinion, beliefs. We may experience pain with or without attachment. We get slapped, and, ouch, that hurts! (If I hold the expectation of reciprocity—favor given/favor received—then I will suffer when the credit isn't returned.) But if we aren't “attached”—if habitual thoughts aren't triggered in reaction to the external event—then the pain fades quickly.

What may arise in its place are empathy, compassion, and a renewed energy to be kind in the face of rejection.

As we gain insight, we begin to help ourselves understand how to drop each thought habit... permanently. We begin to lose our attachment to our ideas. Life starts to seem less heavy—less of a burden—as we become grounded in the best parts of ourselves. ■