

## Gratitude as a Spiritual Practice

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How many of you at this annual tradition sit around the turkey on the table and have everybody say what they are grateful for? Show of hands!

This is a very good tradition. It invites you at least once a year for five minutes or so to focus on all the things that are good in your life. But this is not enough! In my opinion, gratitude needs to be a daily spiritual discipline.

In my many years of interfaith work, I have come to realize that ALL religions share a theology of gratitude. The reason is simple. The discipline of gratitude simply means: becoming aware of everything we can be grateful for. And - this very easy practice reminds us how utterly dependent we are on the people and world around us for everything that matters. After all, every time we say "thank you" to someone, or are grateful for something, our awareness of what has been done for us, or been given to us, is raised. You could also say that a discipline of gratitude helps us to know how much we have been given, and to acknowledge the scope of our dependence. And it helps us with the next step: saying "thank you" to the people we love, to the world we enjoy, to the universe we inhabit, and to the interdependent web of all existence.

People can not exist in isolation. Our relationship with our fellow humans and with the universe is one of utter dependence. Everything that exists is made up of constituent parts that are borrowed from, shared with, and related to others outside it. We are, even the richest person on earth, dependent on others for surviving. We are dependent upon the parents who conceived us. We are dependent on the plants and animals who give their lives for our nourishment. We are dependent on the trees that reverse our cycle of taking in oxygen and giving off carbon dioxide. We are dependent on the sun that warms the atmosphere and lights our path. In every respect, we are utterly dependent! Nobody on this planet is ever completely self-sufficient. Becoming aware of that fact inevitably leads to a sense of gratitude.

You are all aware that a sense of awe is a spiritual impulse. It is an experience of transcendence, of being part of something much larger than ourselves. Therefore gratitude is a uniquely religious virtue. I believe that gratitude is the most basic and important religious response to the nature of the universe. Simply because the sensation of awe and wonder that leads to gratefulness emerges from experiencing the grandeur of life and the interdependent web of all existence. While we feel a sense of great joy at being alive, we recognize our utter dependence on sources of being beyond ourselves.

Gratitude is a very easy spiritual discipline! Let me give you an example: The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh once said: "*every morning when I wake up, I smile and say to myself: Wow! 24 brand new hours! And they are all mine!*" Don't you think that

this simple habit can make for a really great start of your day!

I invite all of you to adopt a spiritual discipline of gratitude. The more you become aware of everything you can be thankful for, the more you will be connected to the source of all life. You've probably heard of gratitude journals: every night, before you go to bed, you write down a list of five or more things from your day that you are grateful for. Saying grace before a meal is a gratitude practice, too! A related spiritual practice is to take Thich Nhat Hanh's example and become aware of what you are grateful for a few minutes in the morning when you just wake up.

After all, here is the most profound gift: I'm grateful to be alive.

But then there are countless simple things we never pay attention to: I am also grateful for having warm water for a shower, having a goofy dog who cheers me up, for the alarm function on my smartphone, for the love and support of my husband, for the miracle of the rainbow I saw, for my homemade jelly for breakfast, for the purple candle on my desk, for the softness of my gloves, and so on.

One of my daily practices has to do with food. When I sit down to eat, I try to pause for a moment and reflect on the labor that was necessary to bring this food to the table; from the people who harvested it to the cook who prepared it. I also give thanks to the plants and animals who gave their lives so that I may live; and to the sun and the rain that were necessary for everything to grow. Whenever I do this, I enjoy my meal more, because, as Oprah Winfrey said: *"What you focus on expands, and when you focus on the goodness in your life, you create more of it."*

So it's not only gratitude for the big things in your life - like a new super-size TV, or a sports car in your driveway, that you want to become aware of. And please, do not use comparative gratitude, to compare your own life or circumstances with those of others who have less than you. That never works for more than a moment. One of my pet peeves is the sentence: *"There but for the grace of God go I..."* What it says is that these others, who have not been so lucky, were excluded from God's grace - I cannot believe in such a God!

A spiritual discipline of gratitude is so easy! Just pay a little closer attention to your life! Stop running around all the time! Or, turn off the TV for a few hours...You'll notice more things - like the change in the air as fall arrives, the smile of a person passing you in a store, the energy of a child on the playground. Life is made up of moments like these. A discipline of gratitude can give you a new way of looking at the world. Here are a few examples for some special gratitude exercises. The first one was inspired by a quote by Albert Schweitzer. He wrote, *"In everyone's life, at some time, our inner fire goes out. It is then rekindled by an encounter with another human being."* Think of a time when your inner fire was very low, or even went out. Who helped rekindle your light again? Take some time to express gratitude to that person: write a

note, send an email, make a phone call to them. In a similar exercise, you can focus on who or what has helped you to succeed. Try to compose a gratitude list of ten people, places or events that have helped you succeed in your life. After you have composed your list, pick at least three of them and find some meaningful way to express your gratitude today.

If you cultivate gratitude, you will also experience an increase in your "sympathetic joy", your happiness at another's happiness. Just as you feel the pain of others, so you can feel their joy as well! And here is yet another possibility for a gratitude practice: try to cultivate gratitude for the good fortune of others: a child's first steps, someone's job promotion, good news on a medical test, a story about someone's success... whatever it is, when you hear about it, really try to focus on another's happiness and feel thankful for it. Experiencing such "Sympathetic Joy" is an important religious goal for Buddhists and Hindus. But it is not a rarefied feeling reserved for the spiritually advanced. We all feel it. Parents may feel a thrill of joy run through their bodies when their kid catches a fly ball in center field or learns to ride a two wheeler.

People who aren't parents may feel it when their favorite candidate wins an election, or their favorite sports team wins a championship. As you cultivate gratitude for this sympathetic joy within you, you're growing your capacity for love and happiness.

Finally, you can also experience sympathetic joy when someone expresses gratitude towards you. Add to your spiritual practice of gratitude the effort to receive thanks with grace! Because receiving gratitude with a warm smile affirms the relationship you have with the giver. By the way, you should never answer a "Thank You!" with "no problem!" Because that statement diminishes, and devalues your own efforts, as well as the gratitude that is expressed!

So you see - if you want to develop a spiritual discipline of gratitude, all you have to do is increase your awareness of all the things that have been given to you: food, water, shelter, love, kittens, your children, your spouse, safety, security, color, music, soft pillows, etc. – and what has been done for you! And then sit with this awareness. One minute a day is already a great achievement. Maybe you can increase it to 2 minutes or more over time, but the length of time is not important. Doing it regularly is what counts...in the morning in your car, on the way to work, at night before you go to bed, in line at the store, when you walk your dog, in the shower. Whatever works for you.

I hope I have given you a few ideas for how you can incorporate gratitude as a spiritual practice into your life. Let me add a quote by Albert Schweitzer: *"To educate yourself for the feeling of gratitude means to take nothing for granted, but to always seek out, and value the kindness that will stand behind the action. Nothing that is done for you is a matter of course. Everything originates in a will for the good, which is directed at you. Train yourself never to put off the word or action for the expression of*

*gratitude.*” Gratitude connects the present with the past, as well as connecting the present with the future. You see, the awareness of our gratitude demands that we nurture the world that nurtures us in return. The spiritual practice of gratitude makes us realize that we have an obligation to constantly create a future that will bring an increasing sense of gratitude from the human family as a whole. Experiencing gratitude for all that’s good in our life, can motivate and help us to work for a future in which all relationships—among humans, as well as between humans and the physical world—are fair, constructive, and beautiful.

May gratitude become an ethical obligation as well as a religious duty for all of us, to create and foster the kind of world we want to live in!

So may it be...