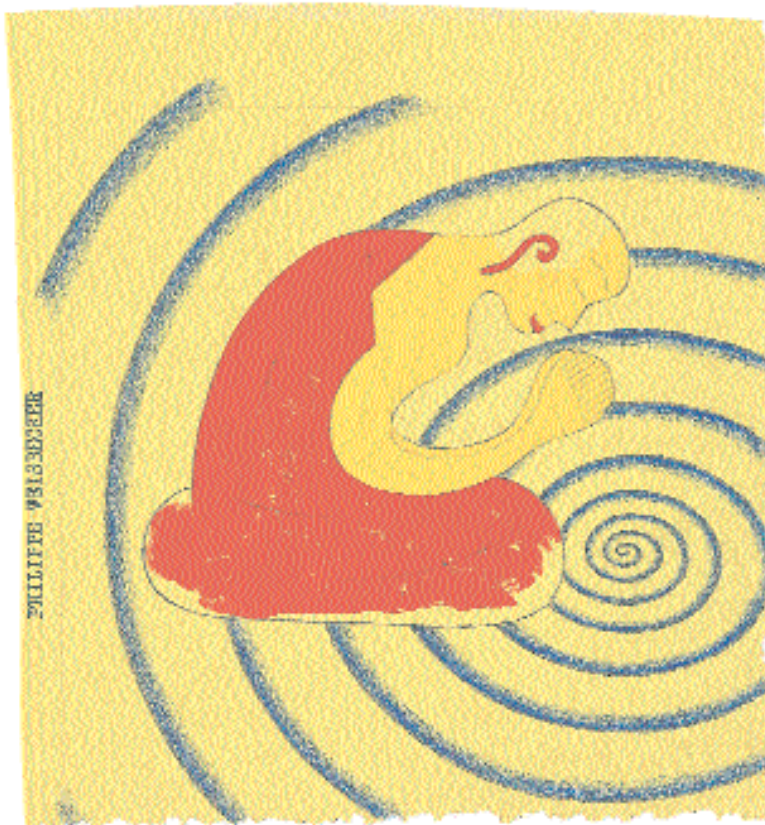


Selfless Gratitude

Through the mindfulness practice of gratitude,
you are able to rejoice amidst all life's suffering.



The Buddha taught that every human birth is precious and worthy of gratitude. In one of his well-known analogies, he said that receiving a human birth is more rare than the chance that a blind turtle floating in the ocean would stick its head through a small hoop. He would often instruct a monk to take his ground cloth into the forest, sit at the base of a tree, and begin “gladdening the heart” by reflecting on the series of fortunate circumstances that had given the monk the motivation and ability to seek freedom through understanding the dharma.

Practicing mindfulness of gratitude consistently leads to a direct experience of being connected to life and the realization that there is a larger context in which your personal story is unfolding. Being relieved of the endless wants and worries of your life's drama, even temporarily, is liberating. Cultivating thankfulness for being part of life blossoms into a feeling of being blessed, not in the sense of winning the lottery, but in a more refined appreciation for the interdependent nature of life. It also elicits feelings of generosity, which create further joy. Gratitude can soften a heart that has become too guarded, and it builds the capacity for forgiveness, which creates the clarity of mind that is

ideal for spiritual development.

Let me be clear: The practice of gratitude is not in any way a denial of life's difficulties. We live in troubling times, and no doubt you've experienced many challenges, uncertainties, and disappointments in your own life. Nor does the practice of gratitude deny the Buddha's teaching on death: Death is certain; your death is certain; the time of death is unknown; the time of your death is unknown. Rather, gratitude practice is useful because it turns the mind in such a way that it enables you to live into life or, more accurately, to die into life. Having access to the joy and wonderment of life is the antidote to feelings of scarcity and loss. It allows you to meet life's difficulties with an open heart. The understanding you gain from practicing gratitude frees you from being lost or identified

STUDENTS LEAVING A meditation retreat will sometimes ask me to recommend a mindfulness practice they can incorporate into their daily routine that will keep them in touch with the experiences they've had during the retreat. There are many such practices, but occasionally I suggest one that almost always surprises them and sometimes draws skepticism—the mindful cultivation of gratitude. 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. It is a very powerful form of mindfulness practice, particularly for students who have depressive or self-defeating feelings, those who have access to wonder as an ecstatic state, and those with a reactive personality who habitually notice everything that's wrong in a situation.

with either the negative or the positive aspects of life, letting you simply meet life in each moment as it rises.

In the Bible the disciple Paul instructs, “In everything give thanks.” What he means is that from your limited perspective it is not possible to know the outcome of any event. What can seem unfortunate at first may turn out to be an unforeseen blessing.

There is a very old Sufi story about a man whose son captured a strong, beautiful, wild horse, and all the neighbors told the man how fortunate he was. The man patiently replied, “We will see.” One day the horse threw the son who broke his leg, and all the neighbors told the man how cursed he was that the son had ever found the horse. Again the man answered, “We will see.” Soon after the son broke his leg, soldiers came to the village and took away all the able-bodied young men, but the son was spared. When the man’s friends told him how lucky the broken leg was, the man would only say, “We will see.” Gratitude for participating in the mystery of life is like this.

The Sufi poet Rumi speaks of the mystery of life coming from God in his poem “The Guest House”: “This being human is a guest house / Every morning a new arrival. / A joy, a depression, a meanness / some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. / Welcome and entertain them all! / Even if they’re a crowd of sorrows / who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture. / Still, treat each guest honorably. / He may be clearing you out for some new delight.” (*The Essential Rumi*. Coleman Barks, HarperSanFrancisco, 1995.) Gratitude practiced in this manner brings delight, balances out your tendency to focus on the negative, and can even lift a dark mood.

Counting Your Blessings

THERE ARE NUMEROUS ways to use mindfulness to cultivate gratitude. Of course you acknowledge your appreciation when things are going well. But even more helpful is to notice those things for which you are grateful when you are contracted physically or emotionally. I often instruct students to respond to a difficult

situation by acknowledging it as such, then saying to themselves, “Yes, this is terrible, and I am grateful for” An example would be, “I am angry at this moment, and I am grateful I have a mind which knows this is so and can deal with it.” I also encourage students to focus on the wonderment of nature and the human capacity for learning and creating. It is so easy to only notice the terrible aspects of human beings so that wonderment is often forgotten.

You can reflect on gratitude by inquiring if it is time-based. Ask yourself what happened to all the gratitude you have felt in the past? Where did it go? Do you believe that gratitude is dependent on feeling good right now? If so, isn’t that a very small-minded, “what have you done for me lately?” attitude? Would it not imply that your gratitude is contingent upon an exchange—as long as you feel good, you will be grateful, and if not, forget it. This is not the quality of gratitude that leads to a mystical, direct experience of life; it is an unskillful blackmail or emotional demand on the universe.

You can also practice being consciously grateful to your family, friends, teachers, benefactors, and all those who have come before you who have made it possible for your existence to be comfortable, informed, and empowered. Take a few minutes at the end of each day to mentally note the many people who have invisibly served you by providing medicine, shelter, safety, food, and education.

If you were asked to make a list of things for which you are grateful, how long would this list be—20 items, 100, 500? Most likely you would include your health, your mind’s ability to function well, family, friends, and freedom. But would it include the basics, like a safe place to sleep, clean air and water, food, and medicine? What about for Earth itself, blue skies, a child’s laughter, a warm touch, the smell of spring, the tang of salt, the sweetness of sugar, or that morning cup of coffee?

The making of such a list is not meant to make you feel indebted but is intended to clarify your understanding of how life really is. It is a reflective meditation that

uses mindfulness to carry you beyond the superficial to a deeper experience of your life unfolding moment by moment. You learn to throw off the blinders of habitual assumptions that prevent you from perceiving the miracle of life.

The next step in gratitude practice is to actively notice things you are grateful for throughout your regular day. For instance, when you’re stuck in traffic and it’s making you late and irritated, you notice you can be thankful you have transportation and that other drivers are abiding by the agreed-upon driving rules, which prevent chaos and unsafe conditions. In other words, there is a level of well-being and community cooperation that is supporting you even in the midst of your bad day. And you do this not just once or twice, but a hundred times each day. You do so not to get out of a bad mood or to be a nicer person, but with the intention of clearly seeing the true situation of your life. Traffic remains frustrating, but the inner experience of how your life is unfolding begins to shift. Slowly you become clearer about what really matters to you, and there is more ease in your daily experience.

You might ask yourself about your “gratitude ratio.” Do you experience the good things in your life in true proportion to the bad things? Or do the bad things receive a disproportionate amount of your attention, such that you have a distorted sense of your life? It can be shocking to examine your life this way because you may begin to realize how you are being defined by an endless series of emotional reactions, many of which are based on relatively unimportant, temporary desires. When you look at how much gripping you do versus how much gratitude you feel, you realize how far off your emotional response is from your real situation. The purpose of this inquiry is not to judge yourself but rather to motivate yourself to find a truer perspective. Why would you want to go around with a distorted view of your life, particularly when it makes you miserable?

Without instruction, reflecting on gratitude can seem boring or sentimental, evoking memories of your mother ad-

monishing you to eat all the food on your plate. Part of the confusion is that many people have come to equate gratitude with obligation. But real gratitude begins as appreciation for that which has come into your life. Out of this appreciation, a natural, spontaneous emotion arises that is gratitude, which is often followed by generosity. When gratitude comes from indebtedness, by definition what's been given cannot have been a gift.

There is a shadow side to gratitude, in which reality gets distorted in yet another way. It manifests as a hopeless or helpless attitude disguised as gratitude, and it expresses itself in a self-defeating, passive voice—"Yes, these things are wrong and unfair, but I should be grateful for what I have," or "At least we have this," or "Compared to these people, look how much better off we are." This voice, whether it is an inner voice or comes from someone else, is not to be trusted. Gratitude is not an excuse for being passive in the face of personal or societal need or injustice. You are not excused from working to become a caring person, creating a better life for your loved ones, or protecting the innocent. Acknowledging the great gift of a human life through gratitude is just the opposite; it is a call to action to be a caring human being while acknowledging the folly of basing your happiness on the outcome of your actions.

Shortchanging Gratitude

MANY STUDENTS ASK, If experiencing gratitude feels so good, why do we often shortchange it? If you will answer this question for yourself, you will gain much insight into how you make your life more difficult than it need be. Sometimes you shortchange gratitude because your mind is stuck in problem-solving mode; it only notices what isn't working and sets about trying to resolve it. This might seem desirable, but in fact there will always be things wrong in your life. So you reduce your experience of being alive if you are only responding to the negative. Is that what you want out of life? Do you really want to delay your sense of being alive while you await a future, perfect moment that is unlikely to arrive?

A second reason you might shortchange gratitude is related to the first: The mind tends to take for granted whatever is both desirable and present. This happens because the mind wants constant stimulation, and whatever is present and pleasant tends not to create that stimulation. You can see this for yourself around eating a favorite food: Notice how the first few bites taste so delicious, then how quickly the mind ceases to register the pleasant sensations. It is like this with everything—a cool breeze on a hot day, the sound of a stream as it flows over rocks, the freshness of the morning air after a rain. They all simply disappear from consciousness in the untrained mind. However, a mind trained in mindfulness of gratitude will stay attuned far longer and note more details of that which is good.

The phenomenon of comparing mind is another hindrance to practicing gratitude. It is the aspect of your mind that notices, "She has a nicer car than I do," "He is stronger than I am," or "She is a better yogini than I am." Understand that there is a difference between discernment, the factor of mind that sees things clearly, and comparing mind, which exercises judgment and hides a belief system that says, "If only I have more of the right things, I will be happy." This is a false belief, of course, a mental habit really; but because it is unacknowledged and seldom examined, it holds enormous power in your life.

Unrecognized arrogance arising from a hidden sense of entitlement can also be an obstacle to practicing gratitude. When you have a strong feeling of entitlement, you don't notice what is going well, but rather what is not right. It can stem from a sense of either having suffered unfairly or having been deprived. It can also arise from feeling special because you are smart, a hard worker, or successful. At the subtle level of mindfulness, this arrogance is a form of ignorance where these two truths of life are mixed together.

Finding Grace Through Gratitude

THE WORDS "GRATITUDE" and "grace" share a common origin: the Latin word

gratus, meaning "pleasing" or "thankful." When you are in a deep state of gratitude, you will often spontaneously feel the presence of grace. The grace in receiving a human life is that it grants you the capacity to experience that which is beyond the mind and body—call it God, emptiness, Brahman, Allah, or the Ground of the Absolute.

Reflect on this: You, with all your flaws, have been chosen for this opportunity to consciously taste life, to know it for what it is, and to make of it what you are able. This gift of a conscious life is grace, even when your life is filled with great difficulty and it may not feel like a gift at the time.

When Henry Thoreau went into retreat at Walden Pond, he and his friend Ralph Emerson had been studying Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist texts. He wrote: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." He understood that conscious life was a gift for which the highest form of gratitude was to know it in all its depths.

This grace of conscious life, of having a mind that can know "this moment is like this," is the root of all wonder, from which gratitude flows. The wonder, the mystery, is that you, like everyone else, are given this short, precious time of conscious embodiment in which you can directly know life for yourself. However you find life to be—cruel or kind, sorrowful or joyous, bland or stimulating, indifferent or filled with love—you get the privilege of knowing it firsthand.

Gratitude for the grace of conscious embodiment evolves into the practice of selfless gratitude, in which your concerns slowly but surely shift from being mostly about yourself and those close to you to being about all living beings. As this occurs, you need less and less in the way of good fortune. It becomes enough that there are those who are happy, who are receiving love, who are safe, and who have a promising future. It is not that you would not prefer good things for yourself, but your sense of well-being is no longer

contingent on external circumstances. You are able to rejoice that amidst all life's suffering there exists joy. You realize that pain and joy are part of a mysterious whole. When this state of selfless gratitude starts to blossom, your mind becomes more spacious, quieter, and your heart receives its first taste of the long-sought release from fear and wanting. This is grace. ■

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