

Cultivating Gratitude

"To speak gratitude is courteous and pleasant, to enact gratitude is generous and noble, but to live gratitude is to touch Heaven." -Johannes A. Gaertner

Most spiritual and psychological traditions speak of the importance of cultivating a sense of gratitude in life, if one is to evolve into higher realms of human existence and consistently experience joy, aliveness and meaning in one's life. This is especially true here in the Western world, where we are bombarded with the lure and illusory promise of material things from the moment we are born. Our entire consumer-oriented culture is based on convincing people that the real solution to their unhappiness and dissatisfaction in life is that they need to buy something they do not yet have (and often really do not need), and then making them feel even worse if they can't or won't buy it. All of our major indices of prosperity and success are based on the idea that consumption is good, and more consumption is better. Consequently, even if we do buy the latest thing, our satisfaction is short-lived and fades as soon as the next new gizmo comes out. As a result, people feel badly if their house "only" has 2000 square feet and their car has not grown to tank-size proportions like the ones they see in their neighbor's driveway and their boat is only twenty feet long.

But what inner qualities does this entire industry of induced consumption breed in us? Unfortunately, it has created a nation of greedy, envious, self-serving, worried, competitive people who tend to put more attention on what they don't have than what they have, creating more craving, more desire, more emptiness, and more longing. Compare this attitude with that of the philosopher Epictetus, who said, "He is a wise man who does not grieve for the things which he has not, but rejoices for those which he has."

And this attitude of dissatisfaction exists in a country which has more material prosperity than any country in history. Just how fortunate are we in the United States? According to recent estimates by the United Nations, worldwide, about 24,000 people die every day from hunger or hunger-related causes; some 800 million people in the world suffer from hunger and malnutrition; and 1.6 billion people still live in absolute poverty. If one includes those living in "relative poverty", the poor population across the globe amounts to 3.3 billion, more than half of the entire world. In other words, over 50% of the population on Earth would be thrilled beyond belief to live at the standard of most Americans. And yet for so many of us, it's still not enough.

Which is where gratitude comes in. We need a major attitude shift if we are to create healthier relationships, more inner serenity, fulfillment and meaningful lives. Cicero once wrote, "Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others." Gratitude paves the way for a host of other very positive qualities to emerge.

How we can cultivate more of this wonderful quality within ourselves and others? We can begin by starting a Gratitude Journal, writing down all things, both great and small, that we are grateful for in our life. Nothing is too small or insignificant to be included,

because the scale of gratitude knows no bounds. You can be as grateful for the flower that bloomed today as for the home you live in, the health of your family, and the look in your dog's eye when you come home. Review your list daily.

In terms of our relationships, we tend to take our spouses, lovers, significant others and friends for granted. There is no greater gift than to tell a loved one how much you appreciate their presence in your life. Countless times while working with couples we have seen resentment and anger melt away in the presence of sincere gratitude and appreciation. Call a friend or relative, or write a letter to let someone know what they mean to you, even if they are healthy and not in crisis. It's also a wonderful practice to have an entire family express gratitude together on a regular basis; the earlier children start the greater their capacity for gratitude becomes.

The consistent practice of expressing gratitude also reminds us that we do not live alone; we survive only because we are constantly receiving goods from people, from nature, and from spirit. Gratitude helps us to be more aware of the many things that we receive from other people, and realize that our lives depend on the perpetual giving of others, and we feel a deeper responsibility to give more of ourselves. Albert Einstein said, "A hundred times every day I remind myself that my inner and outer life depends on the labors of other men, living and dead, and that I must exert myself in order to give in the measure as I have received and am still receiving".

In closing, here's a wonderful quote by Melody Beattie:

"Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend. Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow."

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