

Gratitude

Many of you were here two weeks ago for the potluck celebrating our sangha and Rick's birthday. Some of you may have heard him say, when speaking to the importance of sangha in spiritual practice, the whole of the holy life, that focusing our attention on the receiving of the giving, from others, from life, was a worthy object of mindfulness.

Tonight I want to explore Gratitude – awareness of the interdependent giving and receiving of life – as a worthy mindfulness practice. Drawing on hearing Rick speak on Gratitude a couple of days later at the Greater Good Science Center's seminar on Gratitude, along with Bob Emmons, the psychologist at UC Davis who was an early pioneer of research on Gratitude, who put gratitude on the research radar in fact. Bob Emmons spoke earlier this year at the Awakening Joy class, along with M.J. Ryan, who wrote Attitudes of Gratitude. James Baraz includes Gratitude as the third step in Awakening Joy, right after setting intention and mindfulness, citing Cicero: Gratitude is not only the greatest of all virtues; it is the parent of all others.

I want to explore gratitude as the parent, certainly as a gateway to all other virtues, drawing on my own experience of doing a gratitude practice with my brother when he was in the hospital two weekends ago, which I'll share in a moment. So, we'll explore gratitude as a spiritual practice, a mindfulness practice, the benefits of a gratitude practice to our personal well-being, as a vehicle of connection with all of life, as a gateway to the sacred Source of life. We'll do an experiential exercise with each other to practice giving and receiving, and then we'll have discussion and questions.

Most traditions teaching gratitude begin with making a list of the things you are grateful for, focusing on the blessings of life rather than the burdens. And that is an excellent first step, because it begins to focus our awareness and begins the arc of gratitude practice.

The arc is:

1. recognizing that a gift has even happened. Literally, re-cog-nizing, knowing anew. Registering in our consciousness that something positive, beneficial, helpful has just occurred, even “waking up” years later to the benefit of something we didn't notice at the time.
2. Recognizing the gift as a gift, taking things AS granted rather than FOR granted.
3. Recognizing that the ongoing process of giving gifts and receiving gifts is relational, which is the exercise we'll do.
4. Recognizing the sources of the gifts we are grateful for, which puts us on the path of honoring the Source of our resources. We are so indebted to all there is for all of who we are.

As we focus our awareness on the things we are grateful for – being alive at all, people in our lives who bring us joy and love, the natural beauty of the world we live in, the experiences of meaningful work and rejuvenating play that restore our energy and our hope – the blessings of our lives – gratitude practice very quickly moves beyond “things” to the cycle of giving and receiving itself. As Bob Emmons says, we begin to take things AS granted rather than FOR granted. We become aware that we don’t have to earn the blessings given us, nor deserve them. We begin to focus on the goodness of the gift, the goodness of the giver of the gift, the goodness of our own true nature as we receive the gift. We begin to focus on goodness as the true nature of existence, we can begin to focus on the interdependence of all of existence, trees breathing into the atmosphere the very oxygen we breathe into our bodies, a glance or touch from another human being that quickens a sense of relational presence in our being. Being thankful to anyone or anything for anything opens our consciousness to the Source of everything, however you hold that in your mind and heart – Beingness or Consciousness, God or the Divine. So that gratitude practice itself becomes a way of being, how we engage with life every moment. As Cindy Lubar Bishop says, I am, therefore I thank.

Gratitude as a way of being brings tremendous benefit – to ourselves personally, to our families, communities, society at large, to our spiritual awakening. We’ll review some of those benefits briefly.

Bob Emmons did some of the early pioneering research on the impact of a gratitude practice on physical, emotional, mental, relational and even spiritual health. His findings have since been replicated in hundreds of studies with diverse populations, even helping to launch the positive psychology movement and the research on happiness which is now so validating of the heart-opening practices followers of the Buddha dharma have been practicing for thousands of years.

People who have a daily gratitude practice:

- * consistently experience more positive emotions
- * feel more alert, energetic, enthused, alive
- * sleep better
- * have lower blood pressure
- * are more likely to accomplish personal goals
- * more likely to exercise and stick with a self-improvement program like losing weight.

Gratitude practice

- *helps block toxic emotions like envy, resentment, regret, hostility, depression,
- * re-focuses attention away from stress and worry
- * brings closure to unresolved traumatic memories
- * improves longevity (by 7-9 years)
- * strengthens social ties (people feel more connected to people, less lonely and isolated)
- * improves a sense of self-worth.

Bob Emmons found that people who practice this arc of gratitude tend to see the world through a lens of abundance rather than scarcity, see what life is offering rather than what life is denying, see life as a gift rather than as a burden, have a sense of satisfaction rather than a sense of deprivation.

So there's a great deal of benefit to a gratitude practice in terms of personal resilience and well-being.

More than that, because gratitude practice is, phenomenologically, relational, practicing gratitude opens the heart to the blessings of connection with other people, even in the most difficult of circumstances, and ultimately leads to altruism, the desire to give to others, to help others as a form of paying back to life the blessings we have received, in a way that fosters a compassionate society.

A hundred times every day I remind myself that my inner and outer life depend on the labors of other men, living and dead, and that I must exert myself in order to give in the same measure as I have received and am still receiving.

- Albert Einstein

My own experience of this came two weekends ago. I had heard Rick and Bob speak at the Greater Good seminar. I was in the midst of writing the e-newsletter on Gratitude over the weekend when my sister-in-law called me to say my brother had been rushed to the emergency room with what turned out to be blood clots. When I talked to him in his hospital room, his life was literally depending on the intravenous drip of blood thinner that would dissolve the clots before they could loosen and travel to his heart or his brain and cause a heart attack or a stroke.

So Barry and I are talking on the phone, 2,000 miles apart, and I don't know what to do, so I suggest, let's do a gratitude practice. I have to let you know that, while I know the generosity and thoughtfulness my brother can show me, and his wife, and his neighbors, to the world, for most of his life, my brother has been a bit of a son-of-a-bitch. His own fears and wounding have led him to react to every glitch in life with anger, hostility, bitterness. So my brother has refused so many of these heart-opening practices until now. Perhaps being at death's door, which does tend to cut to the chase of what's important, perhaps simply surprising him asking for something so simple, to my astonishment my brother agreed.

We began being thankful that he was still alive, that his wife of 23 years was there holding his hand, that the doctors seemed to know what they were doing and seemed to care, that the nurse brought him a glass of water as soon as he asked, that his poodles were safe at home. As we did this practice together, I could feel my heart melting, I could feel the hard places in his heart melting, and we experienced the communion, the presence of some sweetness much larger than ourselves, and could rest in it together. Those five minutes changed my life, changed my brother's life. The next day his step-daughter came in and told him, Barry, you're my real dad. And I heard my brother cry as he let in the love. The next day I told him many of my friends were praying for him and

he said, I thought I felt a disturbance in the force field here. Tell them to keep it coming. It seems to be doing some good.

My brother is home now; the doctors assure him he's fine now, though they also assure him he could have easily died. We have continued the gratitude practice, every day, because it is what keeps our hearts open to each other, and to the mystery of life we are so blessedly held in.

Gratitude seems to be one of the most powerful tools we have to meet the extreme challenges of life. Sonja Lubomirsky, author of *The Science of Happiness*, found in her research that not only is gratitude a great buffer against stress and trauma, it is also one of the greatest antidotes to stress and trauma. I think it's because gratitude drops us into the spaciousness of awareness and acceptance from which we can open up into any of the other great heart-opening practices. Gratitude opens us to compassion, to kindness, to forgiveness, to equanimity, to generosity. And from there, we can have the insight that anything and everything in life can become a catalyst for awakening, even life-threatening blood clots.

Bob Emmons did point out that when life is hard, gratitude can be hard. In the face of difficult circumstances, we can succumb to a pervasive negativity. We can succumb to a sense of entitlement. We can become busy, distracted, forgetful. We can have a hard time surrendering to the dependency and inter-dependency we have with others. We can be traumatized by life events and not have the inner resources to cope.

Even so, gratitude can be the practice that lifts us out of all of that. James Baraz writes in *Awakening Joy*: "Gratitude in our darkest times is more than a matter of remembering our blessings so we can hold the hard stuff in a bigger perspective. With understanding, we see that often it is the suffering itself that deepens us, maturing our perspective on life, making us more compassionate and wise than we would have been without it. How many times have we been inspired by those who embody a wisdom that could only come from dealing with adversity? And how many valuable lessons have we ourselves learned because life has given us unwanted challenges? With a grateful heart, we're not only willing to face our difficulties, we can realize while we're going through them that they are a part of our ripening into wisdom and nobility."

James then quotes Danna Faulds in *Awakening Joy*: It took years for me to realize that the very twists and turns and shadows I labeled "problems" were really sacred ground, grace disguised as obstacles, the whole path a pilgrimage, mysteries baring themselves before me all along the way.

The practice we'll do is one suggested by Bob Emmons, but I've heard many variations of this from many different wisdom teachers, and I've used it in the *Deepening Joy* groups. The practice is to pause for a moment in your life, and begin to think of how other people, at this moment in your life, are keeping your life going. Someone testing water quality at the municipal reservoir so that when you turn on the kitchen faucet you have drinkable water to drink. Or my friend Eric on call 4 days a week to clean up a hazardous waste spill that night occur on a public highway. Medical staff at your local

hospital, right now, in case you slip on a rug on the way to the bathroom, break a bone in your foot or wrist, and have to be rushed to the emergency room. People working at the local gas station ready to help if you fill up your tank on the way home. We'll take a moment to brainstorm with a partner and experience gratitude for the many people staffing airports, grocery stores, fire stations, people growing our food and recycling our garbage, the web of life that keeps our life going, moment to moment to moment. And, as you are doing this exercise with a partner, also focus your awareness on the giving and receiving passing back and forth between the two of you, simply being listened to, witnessed, in your own gratitude practice, or hearing something someone is grateful for sparking ideas of your own.

De-brief.

Questions.

Sit for a moment. As Meister Eckhart says, "If the only prayer you ever said in your entire life was thank you, it would suffice."