

Spirit Rock Meditation Center
Wednesday morning meditation class

December 1, 2010
Linda Graham

GRATITUDE

We've just celebrated giving thanks for the many blessings of our lives in a formal way with Thanksgiving. I want to encourage us all to continue to cultivate gratitude as a daily spiritual practice, as a lifelong path to spiritual awakening and liberation from suffering. Perhaps many of you already do.

There are many personal and practical benefits to a daily gratitude practice. People who practice gratitude daily:

- * 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.

All of these research finds were pioneered by Bob Emmons, psychology professor at U.C. Davis and summarized in his book *Thanks: How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier*. Bob put gratitude on the research radar, finding further that grateful people tend to see the world through a lens of abundance rather than scarcity, see what life is offering rather than what life is denying, have a sense of satisfaction rather than deprivation. Since then, many psychologists and neuroscientists have begun researching gratitude and other practices like altruism, compassion, forgiveness, joy, that can lead to greater personal happiness and well-being, and to a more compassionate society.

But gratitude is far more than a personal practice for personal benefit. Gratitude is a spiritual practice that opens our hearts to the rhythm of infinite giving and receiving that is the fundamental rhythm of life itself. We wake up to the vast inter-connectedness of all of life, the miraculous giving and receiving, giving and receiving, that sustains everything we know about everything there is.

We become aware of how indebted we are to all there is for all of who we are. Gratitude practice then becomes a way of being, a fundamental relationship to life. As Cindy Lubar Bishop says, “I am, therefore I thank.” This fundamental way of relating to life and all of its gifts then becomes a gateway to all of spiritual practice, to a full spiritual awakening and liberation from suffering.

As Spirit Rock teacher James Baraz quotes the roman philosopher Cicero in his book *Awakening Joy*: “Gratitude is not only the greatest of all virtues; - or we might say paramitas - it is the parent of all the others.”

We’ll explore how that happens, specific things we can do to cultivate gratitude, and practice one or two as an experiential exercise.

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 refuges of the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha that guide our lives toward awakening and liberation – the blessings of our lives – we begin to open our consciousness to a loving awareness, to the loving presence of the mystery of all this giving and receiving, we open our awareness to the sources of all this giving and receiving – Beingness or Consciousness or God or the Divine.

Gratitude is one of the most direct ways we have to find our way to a loving awareness of this Being-ness, because it immediately brings us into an arc of presence – openness – connectedness with all there is, into a spacious awareness and acceptance of all that is-ness, that leads to an inner peace and well-being that is the wellspring of love and wise action.

Then we move into gratitude not only for the blessings of our lives but even for the pain and suffering of our lives that can become the catalysts for awakening and transformation.

“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 Baraz

"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."

- Danna Faulds

"The Buddhist teachings are fabulous at simply working with what's happening as your path of awakening, rather than treating your life experiences as some kind of deviation from what is supposed to be happening. The more difficulties you have, in fact, the greater opportunity there is to let them transform you. The difficult things provoke all your irritations and bring your habitual patterns to the surface. And that becomes the moment of truth. You have the choice to launch into the lousy habitual patterns you already have, or to stay with the rawness and discomfort of the situation and let it transform you, on the spot."

- Pema Chodron

"Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos into order, confusion into clarity. It turns problems into gifts, failures into success, the unexpected into perfect timing, and mistakes into important events. Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow."

- Melodie Beattie

I have my own personal story to illustrate this. About a month ago my sister-in-law phoned me to tell me my 60 year old brother Barry had been rushed to the emergency room with shortness of breath and pain in his chest. Turns out he had a blood clot in his right lung and several more in his left leg. When Mary handed the phone to Barry to talk with me directly, 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. I dove right into telling him I loved him, of course, and was glad he was still alive, of course. And then in the midst of all the uncertainty and dreadful possibilities, I began to feel my own gratitude for our connection in that very moment, 2,000 miles apart, the presence of him still in my life.

I suggested we do a gratitude practice right there on the phone. 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 most of the world, for most of his life my brother has been a bit of an S.O.B. 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.

So we'll look at some of the practices that reliably cultivate gratitude and then practice one or two of them ourselves.

1. Keep a gratitude journal This is simply making a list, in your head, in a journal, of 3-5 things you are grateful for, every day. Notice 3-5 different things every day. You begin to accumulate a list that can open you to the infinity of blessings. Keeping a gratitude journal is even more powerful when you share your reflections with a gratitude buddy either in person, on the phone, or by e-mail.
 2. Take in the good: notice and savor the people and blessings you are grateful for. Take a full minute, at least once a day, to let the gratitude soak in, notice where you feel the warmth or glow of the goodness in your body. Not only do we get the benefit of taking in the good in the moment; we're actually building the neural pathways in the brain that make it easier and easier to take in the good again and again.
 3. Unpack any achievement – a promotion at work or a successful brunch with friends, and begin to see all the people who contributed to your success – you mother or home economics teacher who taught you how to cook, the authors and publishers of your favorite cookbook, the farmers who grew the food you cooked. Or at work, the first grade teacher who taught you how to read and the college whose reports helped shape your thinking and the computer programmers who helped you create your power point and your friend who brought you a cup of coffee and a scone when your computer crashed.
- “At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.”
- Albert Schweitzer
4. Or unpack any day and seek the web of inter-connection sustaining your life. The farmer who raised the chickens who laid the eggs that you ate for breakfast. And the PG&E folks who repaired a power outage last night so you could have gas and electricity to cook those eggs this

morning, or the neighbor who came over with a pot of oatmeal because you got busy talking on the phone and burned the eggs to charcoal.

“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

5. Another beautiful way to do this is to unpack any meal, which perhaps you did over Thanksgiving. I first learned this exercise reading the Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran, though, of course, many wisdom teachers suggest something similar.

At your next meal, focus on one particular piece of food, a chunk of sweet potato or a green bean. Let yourself imagine the potato or bean growing in the ground or on a vine. Imagine the people involved in planting, cultivating, harvesting the potato or bean. You can follow many different strands of the web from here. You can imagine the people who designed or manufactured or sold the tools the farmworkers used to grow the potato or bean you are about to eat. You can imagine the people who brought the harvested potatoes or beans to market, sorters, packers, truck drivers, train engineers. You can remember the store clerk who sold you the potato or bean; you can imagine the store clerk sitting with his or her family to eat a similar meal at this very moment. You can imagine the people involved in that family’s lives, their neighbors, school teachers, car mechanics. You can follow the thread from any particular potato or bean and find yourself becoming aware of the entire web of life.

“When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.” - John Muir

6. Find something to appreciate in the moment, even if most of the moment is terribly wrong. A breath without pain. A moment of clarity about how this awfulness actually came to be. The integrity of the person you are in a terrible disagreement with. This is a useful practice, especially in moments you feel like clobbering your difficult person with a frying pan. Find something to appreciate in that moment. That they held the door for you as you walked into the house even though they didn’t pay attention to anything you said. Or they’re being attentive to their 4 year old even though they have no bandwidth for anyone else. Or remembering that a year ago they surprised the heck out of you by getting your daughter the poodle puppy she had so yearned for. Use your gratitude and shift your perspective to the larger view.

Now we will do an exercise to cultivate gratitude for the web of interconnectedness the true world wide web, as the source of all this giving and receiving.

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 might 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.

Exercise; de-brief in large group.

Homework: James Baraz tells the story of suggesting to his 89 year old mother after every complaint, every negativity, to add the phrase...and my life is truly very blessed. Even after a few days of practice, her attitude toward life events began to change. Now, after two years, she's like another person

“You simply will not be the same person two months from now after consciously giving thanks each day for the abundance that exists in your life.”

- Sarah Ban Breathnach

To sum up: A practice of gratitude, like all practices, can be a refuge in times of trouble, a resource to help us keep going, a way to come into loving presence in the moment, an antidote to the complaining mind, a way to shift focus away from a funk, a way to open the heart as well as to clear the mind. When we pause to notice what we usually take for granted, we change how we perceive and respond to experience in life. We see what is filling and fueling our lives rather than what is missing. As we cultivate the habit of being grateful, the mind naturally comes to rest on the goodness of our lives. If you have the intention to awaken gratitude, over time it will gradually become the natural rhythm of your heart. Gratitude becomes a whole new way of being, strong enough to hold even suffering. When we're faced with challenges, gratitude opens us to a larger perspective that helps us more effectively address them. And that way of being further shapes how we perceive and respond to life with greater and greater acceptance, ease and joy.

Closing meditation

“If the only prayer you ever said in your entire life what thank you, it would suffice.”

- Meister Eckhart