

**Centering Meditation**

Allow yourself to arrive here, gently let go of the day, all the activity, all the movements and feelings and thoughts and concerns. Let yourself become aware of sitting here, in this place, in this moment. Settle into the safety and peacefulness of this gathering, in this moment. Become aware of being in your body, sitting, breathing. Settle into an awareness of your breathing, gently breathing in and out. Let your awareness settle on your breathing.

Mindfully notice anything arising in these moments of awareness, allow and accept whatever is arising to be here, naming it if you wish, letting it be, letting it in with compassion, letting it go with equanimity. Return your awareness to your breathing; relax into the awareness.

**Check-Ins**

My check-in about gratitude. You may not know this story unless you heard me talk about gratitude in the Wednesday evening sangha or read the October and November e-newsletters last fall about Gratitude.

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.

And now, the reconciliation continues. My brother has invited me to visit him and his wife Mary in June, for the first time in 17 years.

### **Dharma Talk: Grateful Heart, Joyful Heart**

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.

How this works: When we're unhappy – depressed, angry, in pain – we contract. The simple practice of gratitude actually begins to relax the mind. Instead of seeing things from only one perspective, we become “open-minded”. The causes of suffering don't go away, but the context in which they're happening gets bigger. With a grateful heart, we have the container and a compassionate space to hold the difficulties we meet. As James wrote in his monthly letter to the Awakening Joy course participants, Saying yes to the moment – the essence of mindfulness practice – helps us develop the courage and willingness to be with anything in our experience. This gives rise to a feeling that the present moment is enough as it is. We strengthen our ability to be content with whatever life is offering us. Contentment – not looking for a better moment – gives birth to appreciation which then blossoms into gratitude. We say yes to the experience of the moment, which can be a gateway to contentment and wonder. Gratitude is a gateway to wonder, awe, the mystery that anything exists at all. We can be grateful, as it says in the Talmud, for the gift of our portion.

The two speakers in the Awakening Joy class last year approached gratitude from both a research perspective – the power of gratitude to effect change - and from a practice perspective – tools to cultivate gratitude as a capacity and as a way of being. From a research perspective, gratitude is the easiest of the pro-social emotions to access and practice. Its immediate benefits are in bringing the nervous system back into balance (as Mindfulness does). Gratitude relaxes the mind, lowers blood pressure; people are more resilient to stress, sleep better, and live longer (7-9 years). People who practice gratitude are more positive, more alert, more energized.

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.

My friend Rose Saint John reminded me of a practice she learned from the Zen teacher Yvonne Rand – when irritation or crankiness starts up, think of ten things to be grateful for. Watch irritation dissolve.

M.J. Ryan, whose book *Attitude of Gratitude* is a real gem, said that gratitude is not that complicated, but it's not thinking either. It's felt with the heart, so it helps to be specific, close and particular, like how you light up when you see your child's dimples. She suggested a Just in Time practice – when you're about to get into an argument, pause and focus on what do I appreciate about this person right now? And a What's Right with What's Wrong practice – find something specific to appreciate in the moment, even if it's a breath without pain. To say Yes to the moment, even if most of it is terribly wrong. And she reiterated that the practice James taught his mother, mentioned in the AJ book, of blah, blah, blah...AND, my life is truly blessed, was the best technique she'd ever heard of.

Bob Emmons, his initial research on gratitude at UC Davis is what started the gratitude movement. Students writing down blessings or burdens every day for 10 weeks. Among other results, Bob found that students writing down blessing rather than burdens, wound up with higher GPA's for the semester than the controls. Bob sees gratitude as affirming goodness and recognizing the source. Gift, goodness of gift, goodness of give, grace of gift. Taking things AS granted rather than FOR granted. Because gratitude practice shifts the world view of the person practicing it, toward abundance rather than scarcity, toward satisfaction rather than deprivation, toward affirming life rather than denying life (YES to the moment) he sees it as the key to meaning of existence (MeisterEckhart says, "If the only prayer you ever said in your whole life was Thank You, it would suffice.") He sees gratitude as the most transformative power in the universe.

James sees Gratitude as a turning point in the path of deepening joy.

In his book, James shared the story of Bonnie Jonsson, his wife Jane's gratitude buddy, and how Bonnie's gratitude perspective carried her through her battle with breast cancer.

These are excerpts from e-mails Bonnie sent Jane during her treatment, some of which is in the book:

# 1. FINALLY I got the result of the test I've been waiting for and it shows an intermediate risk for recurrence. That has helped me to decide to have chemo. I start next Tuesday. I will have just 4 treatments with 3 weeks in between. Then there will be a rest time and I'll start 4 weeks of radiation at high dose.

I feel positive about this. Just sad that we'll miss Sweden this summer.

I consider this a powerful retreat coming up - a spring retreat.

# 2. Just a few words to let you know I'm doing well now. The first chemo was pretty rough - I took all the anti-nausea drugs, was disgusted with sweets and craved protein, then had a few not so bad days followed by severe white blood cell drop. Those days were hard. I had daily shots, went on an anti-biotic, was told to stay away from groups of people and not eat salads, had severe back pain - one night like labor pain, and was totally wiped out. This week has been almost normal.

Next week I postponed my second chemo to celebrate my birthday and have my head shaved (my hair is now beginning to fall out) by a Tibetan Rinpoche at a ceremony at the community where I teach.

Emotionally I've been well. My heart broke open the second week, being at the cancer center with so many people with cancer. I felt very much a part of it and very much a part of life that can be difficult for us people. My heart breaking was a good thing.

Mostly I've been with what's happening - not wishing it away and not wanting it to be over. It's my practice. My intention for this year is to be mindful - really being with what is. I already know everything is impermanent - just trying to live it.

#3. Life has become more of a practice than ever. The 2nd round of chemo has been difficult but "I" don't add to it. What I feel most is gratitude. I cry now just feeling this. I'm perhaps more than ever aware of dukkha - of politics and why there are rice shortages, of complicity and abuse. Yet when I woke up the other day and looked at the full moon through the skylights - clouds surrounding it then moving to cover it, AHHHHHHHH. Life.

I am now bald. I feel like a turtle out of its shell - vulnerable. I am grateful for this. It gives me the chance to have new imprints. I choose to let-go. I choose to give and receive without the habitual lens that covers. When the clouds move in again, as they do, they pass away. Its ok.

This chemo retreat requires everything. What I'm finding at its core is: everything is everything.

#4. This last treatment was quite difficult. There is a cumulative affect that affects energy levels. I can't walk hills, but this week I can walk. I love going to Point Isabel and being with dogs and people who love dogs - quite an uplifting bunch.

I've not been wishing this experience away or wanting time to pass - that would mean I'd miss the real benefit of doing very little. Mostly I sit in my yard and read. Often I don't have the concentration or physical strength to "sit" - and my yard and all the sights and sounds are a wonderful meditation of being with what is. I'm very grateful for the beautiful spring days.

Last week I realized, when energy returned, that I am over the top of the wave of chemo treatments. One more with no more to follow. AHHHHH Chemo is poison and this body feels it. The addition of Chinese medicine, supplements, acupuncture and massage helps to bring balance to this toxic environment.

This week we decided to go to our little summer house in Sweden after all. I am so grateful.

Wishing you mindfulness of the preciousness of this life. Bonnie

Bonnie's 61<sup>th</sup> birthday is April 15, tax day. She'll be offering a workshop on QiGong the following Sunday to celebrate her recovered health and depth of being. She now is radiant, vigorous, and whole.

James: book: p. 69 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.

### **Exercises to cultivate gratitude and appreciation as powerful ally to a joyful heart.**

1. Dyads; share a moment of kindness in last week, and your experience receiving it.
2. Gratitude practice often includes making lists of things we are grateful for, part of the homework. We can be grateful for things;  
For people:  
For infrastructure  
For the little miracles of living  
What we take for granted.

(I love this story: I can't remember now where I learned it, but nursing students were surprised to find on their final exam a question asking them for the names of the orderlies and janitors on their shift. Their instructor wasn't going to pass them unless they valued the human beings they worked with enough to learn their names. Not taking them for granted.)

In dyads, go through a day, what/when can you be grateful for. 20 things/people/infrastructure

3. Another lens 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. Let's 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.

4. James calls this exercise Grateful to the Prickly Ones. M.J. Ryan calls it graduate level gratitude. James tells the story of himself being moved to realize people he had not been able to feel gratitude for because they had disappointed him or betrayed him in some way. In the process he would lose gratitude for the good. And of his friend Rob who, on a retreat, had come to realize how he had gotten in touch with what he had to be grateful for about his mother even though she had been judgmental.

Do this in dyads. Work with partner each take two minutes to explore what you might find to be grateful for in someone who has been difficult for you. This doesn't have to be a full blown re-perception of this person, though it could lead to that. Just opening the door.  
– graduate school

5. Gratitude opens us to the web of life.

On a yoga retreat where we said a simple grace before every meal, one of the members who was a local organic farmer always included gratitude for the micro-organisms that enrich the soil that holds the nutrients that grow the plants – cauliflower, broccoli, tomatoes, onions - whatever we were eating at that particular meal.

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 partake of any nutriment at all, we partake of the mystery of nourishment itself.

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

#### 6. Dayenu (we’re about to celebrate Passover)

James shared in the book:

Sometimes I realize I can look at life with that spirit of dayenu. To be given life would have been sufficient. But not only that, to have a healthy body, a kind heart, a good mind, thank you, Life. To be able to enjoy the taste of ripe peaches, delight in listening to Beethoven and the Beatles, take in the sweet smell of gardenias and bay trees, feel someone’s caring through their hug. Thank you. What’s more, this body with all its senses and intelligences comes with a mind that can think creative thoughts, crack jokes, reflect on philosophical questions, and be aware of itself. And in this mind-body process called “me” is the capacity to care for another’s pain, delight in their joy, express my love, and be touched by the world around me. Thank you, Life. And he goes on in the book:

When I look back on my late teens and early twenties, I realize I did lots of crazy things. I was walking nonchalantly and unconsciously through a minefield of potential dangers. Yet, as many of us know, no matter how far we go in the wrong direction, our lives can turn around. Some inner call gets us facing in the direction of goodness, truth, and happiness. Think back to the turning points in your life that got you to where you are now. Could you have written that mysterious script? How can we not be grateful for the amazing grace that keeps us heading in the direction of wholeness? As part of your gratitude practice, you might consider writing a thank-you letter to Life itself, not only for the endless blessings but also for giving you the lessons you needed in order to grow.

Group discussion: gratitude for lessons.

#### **Closing Meditation**

May our sincere intention to practice gratitude open our hearts to joy and allow us to experience our inter-connectedness with all beings.

#### **Homework to cultivate gratitude as capacity and way of being**

1. Write or keep a gratitude journal:

a. As in *How We Choose to Be Happy*, write for 5 minutes, non-stop, all the things, people, blessings, you are grateful for. Be specific. Notice how you feel in your heart after you write the list.

b. As in Bob Emmons research on Gratitude, write down 5 blessings a day you are grateful for (rather than burdens) for a month (be specific!); we'll check in at next group how this shifts your focus, opens your heart and mind, and becomes a powerful ally for joy.

c. As in James' Awakening Joy course, you can exchange these lists with a joy buddy or gratitude buddy.

d. As in Martin Seligman's Authentic Happiness, write a gratitude letter to a specific person who's been helpful in your life, a relative, a friend, a teacher, a co-worker, and read it to that person. Notice the effect on you and on them.

e. As in the Awakening Joy book, p. 85, write a gratitude letter to Life, not only for the endless blessings but also for giving you the lessons you needed in order to grow.

2. As James suggested to a retreatant stuck in complaining mode, change any "I have to" to "I get to" and see if it makes a difference.

3. As James taught his mother - after every negative, complaining statement, to add "...and my life is really very blessed."

4. Mindful Gratitude Practice, from 2011 Awakening Joy course:

a. Sit quietly in a relaxed posture. Focus on the heart center. As you inhale, visualize breathing in benevolent energy into your heart center. With each exhale allow any negativity to be released.

b. Reflect on a person or thing in your life you're grateful for. Begin with the phrase "I'm grateful to..." or "I'm grateful for..."

c. Invite an image of that person or situation. Take a moment to silently send a thought of appreciation to that person or to life for that situation with a simple, sincere "thank you."

d. Let your awareness fully experience your gratitude, taking time to feel in your body the energy of that blessing in our life.

5. When any moment of gratitude arises, pause to consciously notice and savor it. What this moment of gratitude feels like in your body. Whenever you feel that open and delightful experience of gratitude, deepen your happiness groove by pausing to consciously notice what's going on inside you. Just a few seconds is long enough to let the sensations in your body and the state of your mind register in your awareness. As you become familiar with the landscape of gratitude, you will more easily and naturally access it.

**Resources: Quotes of Gratitude for Inter-connectedness**

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, Every Step is Holy

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

All who find happiness in this world have done so by wishing for the happiness of many others. All who find unhappiness in this world have done so by aiming just for their own happiness.

- Shantideva

Help your neighbor’s boat across, and lo! Your own has reached the shore.

- Hindu proverb

Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.

- Martin Luther King, Jr.

Our stream of thought has been working to create an impression of an isolated “self,” set apart from all others, which appears real, substantial, and thereby seemingly safe. Although we have all believed such thoughts of “self” as something isolated from and over against others, we have never existed in that way. Therefore, we can never become happy or fulfilled by pretending to exist in that way. Rather, we have always existed in much deeper relationship to all others, who in their innate nature of goodness and their self-centered habits of thought are like alternative versions of ourselves. That is the reality of our existence.

- John Makransky

A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

- Albert Einstein

We cannot live for ourselves alone. Our lives are connected by a thousand invisible threads, and along these sympathetic fibers, our actions run as causes and return to us as results.

- Herman Melville

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

Patricia Ellsberg's meditation on gratitude, p. 82, Awakening Joy

Shoshana Alexander's rendition of the Buddha's Discourse on Blessings, p. 84, Awakening Joy