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# Attitude of Gratitude

**Acknowledging, Appreciating, Accepting**

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## Introduction

*“If the only prayer you said in your whole life was, ‘thank you,’ that would suffice.” – Meister Eckhart*

The dictionary defines gratitude as:

- The quality of being thankful;
- A readiness to show appreciation for and to return kindness.
- Appreciation, recognition, acknowledge, or thanks.

Gratitude is a key element on a spiritual path. Just as you practice yoga postures, breathing practices, and meditation to strengthen, purify, and de-stress, you can practice gratitude to do the same thing. Practice bringing your attention to the pleasures in your life and the people who make your life rich, full, and more pleasurable can create a joyful atmosphere within and around you.

There is a difference between the brain and the mind, and although there is a difference they are inextricably interconnected. The brain is the machinery that is used to process thought and is a busy place because it processes about 400 billion bits of information a second, although most people are only aware of about 2000 bits. The “Mind” is what the brain does, it is the brain in action at work. Mind creates thought and the average person has approximately 70,000 thoughts in a day. The mind is constantly on the move processing and sending out data about what’s going on around and within.

You have an internal hardwired security system that is always on the hunt, scanning for danger, an evolutionary gift, which serves you well in many ways. However when the mind is constantly on the move like a “hamster on a wheel” there is a perpetual state of worry: “What’s going to go wrong?”, “Where is the danger going to come from next?”, “Am I going to have enough to survive?”, “Where will I get it?”, this takes a toll on your body and your overall experience of life. In this loop of worry there is a signal being sent, a message that you are not okay and there is not enough. As long as you are trapped in this thought pattern, as long as you stay behind a curtain of illusion, and don’t look at what is really there right in front or around you, the mind will be in a perpetual state of a “scarcity mentality.”

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## WHAT IS HAPPENING TO THE BODY

Physiologically in those moments when the mind is racing, worried, and anxious (scan & protect mode), the fight-flight-freeze response (the sympathetic nervous system) kicks into gear, the body is flooded with hormones and chemicals which cause: heart & respiratory rates increase, digestion slows down or stops, blood vessels constrict, the pupils dilate, loss of peripheral vision, decrease in hearing, muscles tense up, an increase in perspiration, and the list goes on. The flood of these hormones and chemicals are meant to be a quick release in times of need. During the release the body morphs into a warrior like state, then when the crisis is over the body goes back to “Rest & Digest” mode (the parasympathetic nervous system). However when the mind perceives perilous situations abounding and you find yourself operating from a perpetual state of crisis, it is like getting a slow iv drip of those hormones. When this lasts for an extended period of time it begins to take its toll on the body creating fatigue, stress, anxiety, and dis-ease.

## FEAR : FALSE. EVIDENCE. APPEARING. REAL

In this reactive state it is difficult and near impossible to be grateful. The mind is drawn towards negative stimuli, it tends to find negativity in any situation, and many times it contorts the moment into an adversity all because in your mind things need to be different. In those moments when the mind is scanning, scheming, evaluating, and judging it is not easy to see what is around and right in front of you, to see what is positive, good, a gift, a blessing, and what is enough.

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## THE SCARCITY SYNDROME

In a world where more is more and there is a tendency to become fixated on what you don't have or what you want rather than what you already have, it can leave you feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, obsessed and depressed. It drains energy, dampens resilience, and robs you of your relationship with a larger life lived in the present moment. However, if you can turn your attention to what you have surrounding you and begin to create a sense of fullness in your life it can elevate, energize, inspire, and transform you.

## A YOGIC PATH

Centuries ago, the great yogic sage Patanjali laid out a map to live a yogic lifestyle. We call them The Yoga Sutras. His plan suggests that it's not just practices such as asana (postures), breath, and meditation that create harmony and homeostasis but also attitudes and behaviors that will help you to chart your course to transformation and bliss. The first two limbs of his path, long before postures which are the most common practice in the west, are about the world that exists with you and the world around you. The yamas outline actions and attitudes which you should avoid and the niyamas outline actions and attitudes you should cultivate, both are done to overcome the illusion of separation and to alleviate suffering.

Gratitude is embedded within the yogic practice of the niyama of santosha which is about contentment or satisfaction. Being thankful for what you have leads to a sense of appreciation which some say is the "supreme joy" that is a natural pathway to the Absolute.

*"I believe that we learn by practice. Whether it means to learn to dance by practicing dancing or to learn to live by practicing living, the principles are the same. In each, it is the performance of a dedicated precise set of acts, physical or intellectual, from which comes shape of achievement, a sense of one's being, a satisfaction of spirit. One becomes, in some area, an athlete of God. Practice means to perform, over and over again in the face of all obstacles, some act of vision, of faith, of desire. Practice is a means of inviting the perfection desired." - Martha Graham*

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There are few people born into the world having a skill mastered. Even if you have natural abilities, a natural talent, you must practice in order to become proficient, effective, skillful, and to maintain & stay current.

So how does practice change the brain? Neuroplasticity is a big topic in the yoga, meditation, & positive psychology circles these days. One of the catch phrases is: “Neurons that fire together wire together.” Neurons are nerve cells in the brain. Neuroplasticity refers to the ability the brain has to reorganize those neurons in order to create new neural pathways. Neural pathways are superhighways of nerve cells that transmit messages. When you travel over the superhighway many times, like when you practice, the pathway becomes ingrained and durable. Think of these neurological changes being made in the brain as it’s way of fine tuning itself to meet your needs. The more you practice the more you create new and strengthen current neural pathways.

## PRACTICING

Variety is the spice of life. Just like there is more than one yoga pose to practice, there is more than just one gratitude practice. I have listed a few below try them on for size, see how they fit into your lifestyle, don’t be afraid to mix it up, and experiment by creating your own practice. A few things to keep in mind are:

- *COMMIT*: make a commitment, it takes 21 days to change a habit.
- *EFFORT*: set an intention to “actively practice” not to wait around to feel grateful but to acknowledge, cultivate, and manifest gratitude life in your daily life.
- *DON’T STOP*: This practice is not like charging a battery. You do not practice until your full and then wait again until you are empty. It is more like breathing, it must happen continuously.
- *ALLOW*: Allow yourself to be human. You cannot expect to be gracious every single moment. Consciously allow yourself to visit the grumbling being that lives inside, notice how it feels, where it takes you. It may provide just the contrast you need to motivate you to go grateful again.

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## **JOURNALING**

Set aside time daily or weekly to list things you are grateful for. You can do this on your computer in a document that you add to or have a dedicated journal that you record your findings in.

## **TOUCHSTONE**

Place a physical object somewhere in your daily environment that reminds you to pause and practice. It can be something on your person like a piece of jewelry, an object you keep in your pocket or on your keyring, or an object that is visible in your environment like a post it note, a statue, or a photo.

## **GRATITUDE MEDITATION**

Find a quiet place and take time for reflection, contemplation and appreciation. The meditation can be a series of questions to ruminate on. Pick a question, dive into it and move on when you are ready. The questions can be something like:

- What does gratitude mean?
- What am I thankful for?
- Who am I thankful for?
- What does gratitude feel like physically in my body?
- How does it live between myself and the loved ones in my life?
- How does it live between myself and strangers?
- What would it be like to live without being grateful?

## **PRESENT MOMENT PAUSE**

Pause in the moment, whatever you are doing and notice all that is around you, use all your senses. What do you hear, smell, feel, taste? Experiencing what is right in front or around you is a wonderful way to be grateful and it assures you do not miss a single blessing.

## **THREE BLESSING EXERCISE**

At the dinner table or before bed, you and your loved one(s) share three blessings you experienced during the day. This may be something you want to keep in a journal or a "Family Blessings Book". This is also a great exercise to use when you or your loved ones have a bad day. After telling about all the "bad" stuff, you then list "3 Blessings" or try flipping it (see below).

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## GRATITUDE VISIT

Martin Seligman, father of Positive Psychology, developed this exercise, in which you think of someone who has made a powerful impact in your life, write a letter of gratitude, and then visit them to read it in person. You can mail it too, but doing it in person is actually one of the most powerful gratitude practices you can do, literally life-changing for many people.

## NO GRUMBLING

Make a commitment not to complain. Set a time period like 24 hours, 1 week, or 21 days (the length of time it takes to change a habit), watch and journal about the shifts and changes that occur.

## LIVING MANTRA

Practice saying “Thank you” anytime you have the opportunity.

## FLIP IT

*“Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness. It took me years to understand that this too, was a gift.” - Mary Oliver*

Take something you were ungrateful for during the day and find a way to flip it. If the face of doubt, trouble or adversity you can ask yourself the following questions:

What, if anything, is good about this?

What can I learn from this?

How can I benefit from this?

Find the silver lining, see the situation from a different perspective, or just to be thankful for the negative experience as a contrast to a positive experience. Remember you practice being grateful for the ‘negative’ in your life, down the road you may look back and see it too was a blessing....

## PASS IT ON

Write, email, or text something sweet, some kind word of appreciation to someone. Let others know you are thinking of them. Cultivate a spiral of good will, generosity, and gratitude to encompass the planet.

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## THE BENEFITS

Dr. Robert Emmons, Ph.D. author of *Thanks!: How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier*, conducted several studies in which he found that practicing gratitude can increase your happiness levels by around 25%. This is significant because just as there's a certain weight that feels natural to your body and to which your body strives to maintain, your basic level of happiness is set at a predetermined or preferred set point. If something bad happens to you during the day, your happiness can drop momentarily, but then it returns to its natural set-point. Likewise, if something positive happens to you, your level of happiness rises, and then it returns, once again, to your happiness set-point. *A practice of gratitude raises your "happiness set-point" so you can remain at a higher level of happiness regardless of outside circumstances.*

### **People Who Practice Gratitude tend to:**

- be more creative.
- bounce back more quickly from adversity.
- have stronger social relationships than those who don't practice gratitude.
- have a tendency to be more loving, forgiving, and optimistic about the future.
- report having higher levels of alertness, enthusiasm, determination, optimism, and energy were more likely to help others.
- made greater progress toward achieving personal goals and generally feel better about their lives.
- tended to exercise more regularly and report fewer illnesses.
- experience less depression and stress.
- have a stronger immune system

Feelings such as anger, bitterness, and resentment are incompatible with gratitude. Gratitude can help shine light on the dark surfaces and into the dark corners of your mind. Being grateful shifts the focus from what your life lacks to the abundance that is already present.

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Celebrate the fact that you do not have to depend on your environment or be at the mercy of your circumstances for this emotion-feeling to arise. You are a being of creation, you can cultivate gratitude wherever you stand. It's been proven that learning to see the good in your life, even in difficult times, is a powerful coping mechanism. To say you feel grateful is not to say that everything in your life is necessarily great. It just means you are aware of your blessings.

*To speak gratitude is courteous and pleasant,  
to enact gratitude is generous and noble,  
but to live gratitude is to touch heaven.*

*– Johannes A. Gartner*

Gratitude should not be practiced in “isolated” incidences but rather in an “all-inclusive” way. Being grateful should not be a reaction to getting what you want, but an “ever present awareness”, the ability to notice the little things around you so that wherever you are you are constantly seeing the good even in unpleasant situations.

*Gratitude is the sweetest of all practices for living the dharma in daily life and it is the most easily cultivated, requiring the least sacrifice for what is gained in return. Practicing the 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, creating a more refined appreciation for the interdependent nature of life.*

*– Phillip Moffitt*

## REFERENCES

### BOOKS

“Thanks!: How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make you Happier”

by Robert A. Emmons, Ph.D.

“Simple Abundance Journal of Gratitude” by Sara Ban Breathnach

“Being Happy” by Tal Ben-Shahar, Ph.D.

“Yoga, and the Pursuit of Happiness” by Sam Chase

“Love 2.0: Finding Health & Happiness in Moments of Connection”

by Barbara Fredrickson

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## WEBSITES

[www.happify.com](http://www.happify.com)[www.pursuit-of-happiness.org](http://www.pursuit-of-happiness.org)

[www.gratefulness.org](http://www.gratefulness.org)

[www.susatalan.com](http://www.susatalan.com) – 365 days of gratitude

[www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) or [www.tedtalks.com](http://www.tedtalks.com) - Joe Dispenza, Tal Ben-Shahar

## MOVIES & PODCASTS

Documentary - Happy

Documentary - What The Bleep

Tara Brach Podcasts on iTunes

- Gratitude & Generosity – Markings of our Inner Freedom : 11/21/12
- Pathways to a Grateful Heart : 11/23/11
- Loving Life: Gratitude and Generosity : 11/24/10

*“The root of joy is gratefulness.... It is not joy that makes us grateful; it is gratitude that makes us joyful.” When we are good at being grateful, we see and experience more of the “good” in life, no matter life’s circumstances. We learn to appreciate the rainbows and the storms in life, and that makes us happier.”*  
- Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast

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