

# Gratitude as a Spiritual Path

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Today I wish to write about gratitude - about the sustaining, medicinal and transformative power of human gratitude as a conscious, spiritual activity. The conscious cultivation of gratitude is the 6<sup>th</sup> condition, out of the 7 conditions<sup>1</sup> for spiritual development.

In our normal life we express gratitude when we feel it as a result of something good that just happened, and when we see a reason for it. Someone did something beneficial for us and there is a good reason for feeling gratitude and for expressing it in appreciation. It is a beautiful, nurturing, relationship and community building. For the one who receives our appreciation – hearing an expression of gratitude supports self esteem, the sense of being recognised, opens the doors of the heart, of good will and deeper meeting.

Gratitude is in fact food for the human soul, and, like any other essential foods - soul-food must be cultivated, not just left to chance. Gratitude is a normal human emotion that we all have, but it can also become a conscious spiritual exercise. As an emotion that comes when things are good and disappears when things are not so good – gratitude is part of normal human life. Gratitude as a consciously cultivated inner dynamic is an integral component of personal, spiritual development.

Personal development is a serious and often difficult process requiring energy, space and time. Any step in conscious personal development exposes elements of soul life that were hidden, repetitive, unconscious, and covered up before. Personal development exposes them to one's own awareness. They become thresholds to overcome. This transforming *IS* the path. We need extra support for this extra challenge. The experience of gratitude can provide such inner support.

The soul is a living organism. Just like the body it needs good food, fresh air, constant clearing, and refreshment. Gratitude is soul refreshment, nurturing and toning. Extending consciousness without extending the nurturing, strengthening experience of gratitude is damaging for the soul. Therefore gratitude is too important for leaving it to chance.

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<sup>1</sup> Steiner, R. (1994). How to Know Higher Worlds: A Modern Path of Initiation. Hudson NY: Anthroposophic Press.

What are the opposites of gratitude? There are many: bitterness, blaming, accusations, self-pity, self-victimisation, anxious blind ambition, dependency, grasping, negativity about oneself and others, envy, jealousy, irritation, reactivity, anger, hostility, criticism, judgment, cynicism, sarcasm, egoism, never having enough of anything, poverty consciousness, being sorry for oneself, feeling unlucky, rejected and mistreated. The opposites of gratitude are toxic for the soul, playing the same role as heavy metals, oxygenators and free radicals play in the body: the agents of exhaustion, fast ageing and degeneration.

A conscious striving for the regular cultivation of the experience of gratitude in the soul acts like flushing the blood of toxicity. It brings light, love, hope and energy to the soul. It enables the soul to grow further, protecting it from the inside. It is possible to cultivate gratitude consciously because there is always so much to be grateful for - if we but think about it. At any point in the day and night you can stop and count all your misfortunes, losses and pains. But at any point in the day and night you can also stop and consciously count the incredibly beneficial contributions made by others to you and your life. People brought you into this life and gave you basic support, without which you would not survive. People provided you with friendship, community, belonging, culture, richness, love, and life experiences. Your heart, skin, bones, flesh, blood, structure, form, immune, digestive, nerve, reproductive, hormones and memory systems, brain, heart, liver, lungs, pancreas, kidneys, stomach, bladder, colon, intestines, glands, ligaments and muscles, senses, warmth, breathing, regeneration of cells and tissues, the very living body – we have not created any of them, we notice them only when something goes wrong, yet they work for us 24 hours a day. The gifts of speech, uprightness, thinking, feeling and willing –were given to us for free.

And the blessed elements of earth, water, air, fire, light, sun, moon, stars, planets, day and night, the seasons, rocks, minerals, plants, animals, oceans, rivers, mountains and fertile lands which make your life possible. As well as the trees, flowers, art, music, literature, human conversation, relationship, intimacy, friendship, expression, man, woman, sexuality, lovers, families, children, home, human kindness. What would your life be without these?

There is so much to be grateful for. There are so many visible and invisible friends that make human life possible and worth living. There is so much we normally take for granted. But the transition from normal human functionality into conscious personal and spiritual development requires the conscious cultivation of gratitude.

Any moment when I stop, choose to focus on something beautiful, true, pure, good and beneficial in my life – will create gratitude. It becomes a moment of clearing, nurturing

and energising my whole body, soul and spirit. A moment of conscious gratitude changes the body: breathing, warming, muscle tension, blood pressure, heart rate – these all improve as a result of a moment of conscious gratitude. If you go to sleep with gratitude for the day – the quality of your sleep will improve. If you start your day with a moment of conscious gratitude for the rest of sleep – your day will have more light in it.

If you stop in the middle of argument, conflict, hostility with someone and focus on the potential gift to your life that this challenge, this person, has brought you – gratitude will follow, enabling a moment of seeing others clearer, in a moment of empathy. And that, inevitably, would change the reactive dynamics, at least on your side of it. Doing it consciously becomes Gratitude as a spiritual path, the 6<sup>th</sup> condition for spiritual development.

There is a deep inherent connection between gratitude and love, which I have observed and explored for many years. Deeds of love, once appreciated leads naturally to gratitude. Think for a moment of someone who did something remarkable for you – and a wave of gratitude will rise in you, with the natural desire to give something back to that person – or to another. Beneficial deeds of love, sooner or later, create gratitude. And gratitude again leads to deeds of love. It is so much easier to love someone you are grateful to, and to love at times when you feel grateful. This is the inherent *economy of love and gratitude*.

Conscious gratitude can also help parenthood. Children take an enormous risk in choosing their parents and they hope to be appreciated for it. They know in their hearts that they are great gifts for us. The opportunity for renewal, love, home, rejuvenation, joy, self awareness and growth that comes with parenthood is enormous. If we make use of that opportunity and stop regularly to appreciate the gift that our children are for us – love will flow ever stronger towards them. Children need constant love from parents, like water and air. How can we generate as much love to give them? By consciously cultivating gratitude for our children – love will flow strongly, easily, joyfully. Gratitude can make parenthood more sustainable.

There is a Zulu word in universal use amongst the Bantu tribes of Southern Africa: *Ubuntu*. It is a name for the most noble, virtuous, dignified and human essence of individuals and of society. It translates roughly into: '*Ubuntu – I am because you are. You are because I am*'. It is an expression of acknowledging, appreciating, respecting, and honouring the human essence in everyone. Ubuntu is the highest social value for South Africans, expressing the aspiration for a human society that appreciates the human dignity of all its individual

members. Ubuntu expresses gratitude for what people and society gives you and for what you are able to give them.

Then there are the undergraduate and the postgraduate levels of practicing gratitude as a spiritual path. The undergraduate level of gratitude was described above: appreciating the goodness in what you have received, gratitude to what is good and lovey and helpful. The postgraduate level of practicing gratitude is more challenging: the cultivation of gratitude to the givers of suffering, crisis, pain and loss. That is much harder. How can I be grateful to someone who causes me pain? On the spot it is nearly impossible. But in retrospect, cultivating gratitude towards past crisis in your life – is much easier. Who would you be now had you not been tested? Would you be who you are now having the same confidence, strength, wisdom, depth and abilities you now possess, if everything in your past was easy, comfortable, gentle and loving? I don't think so! From birth to death we grow through challenges and crisis and confrontations with ourselves, others, society and cultural limitations and oppositions.

At any point you can stop and chose a particular life challenge from the past, loss and suffering, which, at that time created bitterness and disappointment – and appreciate the way you dealt with it, overcame it, recovered, grown to be more of your true self – because of these challenges. At such a moment you develop gratitude on a completely different level: gratitude for the challenges of life, for the tough gifts of life, for the wisdom of Karma. That will prepare you for the next challenge to come, enabling you to meet it with more of your spirit present. That is the higher level of the conscious cultivation of gratitude.

Gratitude makes the soul more transparent to the spiritual dimension of reality. No one likes to be taken for granted. If your gift is acknowledged, then you will be encouraged to reveal more of yourself. That is as true with friends, lovers, parents, employees – as it is regarding the spirits of nature, the wisdom that carry us invisibly. In cultivating an attitude of gratitude to the visible reality around us – the invisible beings surrounding us will be more able to be more known to us, as we become more visible to them in the act of gratitude.

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