

Livingⁱⁿ Gratitude

*Mastering the Art of
Giving Thanks Every Day,
A Month-by-Month Guide*

Angeles Arrien



sounds true
Boulder, Colorado

Contents

Acknowledgments	xix
Foreword by Marianne Williamson.	xxiii
Introduction	1
1. January: Begin Anew.	23
<i>Four Concerns of Soul Making • Hopi Reminders for Starting Anew • Renewed Innocence: Five Qualities of Children</i>	
2. February: Attend to the Heart	41
<i>The Four-Chambered Heart • Spoken and Non-spoken Verses of Love • Dalai Lama's Practice of Cherishing Self and Others</i>	
3. March: Compassionate Service.	61
<i>Five Principles of Compassionate Service • Luck: Where Opportunity and Preparedness Intersect • Nabokov's "Thrill of Gratitude"</i>	

Contents

- 4. April: Mercy and Atonement 77**
*Spirituality of Empathy • States of Ingratitude •
The Cultivation of Mercy and Forgiveness*
- 5. May: The Gift of Grace 95**
*Grace, Gravitas, and Gratitude • Memorial Day
and Aboriginal Dreamtime • Nine Practices of
Excellence from Japan*
- 6. June: The Power of Equanimity 115**
*Balance, Equanimity, and Renewal • Japanese
Practice of Naikan • The Practice and Identification
of Equanimity*
- 7. July: Embracing Nature 131**
*Four Natural Qualities for Survival • Nature's
Three Laws of Governance • Four Soul Retrieval
Places in Nature*
- 8. August: Cultivating Peace 149**
*Embracing Nonviolence: The Quaker Queries •
Shifting Our Relationship to Conflict: Questions from
the Talmud • Three Guidelines for Fair Fighting*
- 9. September: Opening to Guidance and Wisdom . . . 167**
*Seven Outer Practices of Highly Effective People •
Seven Internal Practices for Developing Spirituality
and Character • Five Principles of Optimum Health*

Contents

10. October: Letting Be and Letting Go	185
<i>Deeper Lessons of Living and Being Human • Longings and Belongings • Community and Celebration: Being a Social Architect</i>	
11. November: Grateful Seeing	203
<i>The Breath of Thanks Practice • Indigenous Giveaway Practices • Grateful Seeing: Looking for Goodness and What Is Working</i>	
12. December: The Mystic Heart	221
<i>The Holidays and the Mystic Heart • Two Kinds of Gratitude • Gift-Giving and Royal Generosity</i>	
Epilogue: Living in Gratitude Where We Have Been and How We Can Continue	237
Notes	241
Bibliography	251
Reader's Guide	267
About the Author	273



Introduction

*If the only prayer you say in your whole life is
“thank you,” that would suffice.*

MEISTER ECKHART

THE APPLICATION OF multicultural wisdom—the shared values and the inherent positive beliefs of humanity—has become known as *perennial wisdom*. Perennial wisdom has been passed on from generation to generation since the birth of humankind. It continues to surface among diverse peoples, unconnected by geography or language, yet inextricably linked to what is inherently important in our shared experience of what it means to be human. Of all the universal themes that have been transmitted through perennial

Living in Gratitude

wisdom, the expression of gratitude continues to be the glue that consistently holds society and relationships together; its opposite—ingratitude—contributes to societal dissolution and separation. The expression of gratitude is essential to humankind’s sustainability and survival. Gratitude’s stabilizing and healing effects, which have been researched from multiple standpoints—cultural, psychological, physical, spiritual, even financial—have made it abundantly clear that the benefits of living a grateful life are irrefutable.

If gratitude is a state of being that is essential to a life well lived, why then do we not cultivate and express it on a daily basis? After all, giving thanks and expressing appreciation for the blessings and gifts of life is a natural human response. Perhaps the key reason we do not make gratitude a part of our daily lives is that the accelerated pace and multiple distractions of modern life have simply made it all too easy to forget gratitude’s importance.

We need not settle for our present disconnection from the healing, life-affirming, and uplifting human experience of gratitude. By engaging with the perennial wisdoms, we are reminded of our natural capacity to feel and express gratitude. Through conscious and sustained practice over a period of time, we can discover again how gratitude and all its related qualities—thankfulness, appreciation, compassion, generosity, grace, and so many other positive states—can become integrated and embodied in our lives. And when people in great numbers choose to practice, integrate, and embody gratitude, the cumulative force that is generated can

help create the kind of world we all hope for and desire for ourselves and for future generations.

What Is Gratitude?

Every language in the world has a way of saying “thank you.” This is because gratitude is an inherent quality that resides within each human being, and is triggered and expressed spontaneously in a variety of different contexts. Gratitude crosses all boundaries—creed, age, vocation, gender, and nation—and is emphasized by all the great religious traditions.

Gratitude is essentially *the recognition of the unearned increments of value in one’s experience*—the acknowledgment of the positive things that come our way that we did not actively work toward or ask for. The *International Encyclopedia of Ethics* defines gratitude as “the heart’s internal indicator on which the tally of gifts outweighs exchanges,” a definition that echoes the notion of unearned increments. The connection to the concept of gifts is a natural one. The Latin root of the word *gratitude* is *grata* or *gratia*—a given gift—and from this same root we get our word *grace*, which means a gift freely given that is unearned.

Gratitude is a feeling that spontaneously emerges from within. However, it is not simply an emotional response; it is also a choice we make. We can choose to be grateful, or we can choose to be ungrateful—to take our gifts and blessings for granted. As a choice, gratitude is an attitude or disposition. As writer Alexis de Tocqueville once described it, gratitude is “a habit of the heart.” Brother David Steindl-Rast, a

Living in Gratitude

Benedictine monk, reminds us that “gratefulness is the inner gesture of *giving* meaning to our life by *receiving* life as gift.” M. J. Ryan’s classic book *Attitudes of Gratitude* supports the idea that gratitude is a stance we voluntarily take, and one we can adopt through the difficult seasons of life as well as the good ones. The daily practice of gratitude keeps the heart open regardless of what comes our way.

Gratitude as Virtue

Virtues are qualities that support the inherent goodness that resides within each human being. Gratitude is both a social and a theological virtue. The Hebrew scriptures, the New Testament, and the Qur’an all cite gratitude as central among virtues. Centuries ago, the philosopher Cicero argued that gratitude is the parent of all virtues, a virtue that begets other virtues. The cultivation of gratitude develops character, the embodiment of desired virtues. The advice to cultivate character by expanding one’s capacity for gratitude is time-honored wisdom. The art of maintaining a grateful disposition engenders other virtues such as generosity, humility, compassion, wisdom, joy, integrity, and trust. This disposition of mindfulness, of being aware of and thankful for our blessings, helps cultivate our virtues and significantly diminishes, or can even eradicate, any obstacles to gratitude we may face.

Related Qualities

There are several words that arise repeatedly when discussing gratitude, all of which reflect states that are related to it.

Introduction

While gratitude is both a feeling and an attitude, *thankfulness* is the demonstrative expression of it, whether extended to ourselves or others. We can express thanks in words—spoken or written—or in deeds, by extending time, resources, or gifts to support people in unexpected ways or to help those in need. *Appreciation* is the recognition of that which makes us feel grateful, and can also be expressed internally or externally. Gratitude often ignites acts of generosity; we are moved to offer ourselves to others without expecting anything in return. Buddhists refer to generous acts that are freely given as “royal generosity.” These are just a few of the qualities related to gratitude. The expression of gratitude creates an opening that invites many other positive states and experiences into our lives.

Four Universal Portals to Gratitude: Blessings, Learnings, Mercies, and Protections

There are four portals—or entryways—to the experience of gratitude. Recognizing these portals at the time when they appear in our lives is key to developing the capacity to cultivate gratitude. *Blessings* are the primary, cross-cultural portal through which we experience gratitude. Additionally, *learnings*, *mercies*, and *protections* are three other portals attributed with fostering gratitude in various worldwide cultures. Each month we will be tracking these portals and how they are surfacing in our work, relationships, health, finances, and personal growth.

Living in Gratitude

Blessings

Blessings are those experiences we hold as “the good” in our lives. The language of blessing is invocation, a calling forth. To bless is to sanctify; to recognize the presence of grace; to confer well-being or prosperity upon others; to endow; or to invoke divine favor upon others or ourselves. Giving gratitude for our blessings is a way to recognize and honor them. John O’Donohue writes in his book *To Bless the Space Between Us*, “The word *blessing* evokes a sense of warmth and protection; it suggests that no life is alone or unreachable. Each life is clothed in raiment of spirit that secretly links it to everything else. Though suffering and chaos befall us, they can never quench that inner light of providence.” Blessings are gifts that open doors to healing, connection, meaning, and transformation. Essentially, the world itself cannot exist without blessings.

Learnings

Whenever we are learning, we are growing. Often, what we are learning challenges us to stretch, to reexamine, and to rise to a new standard of excellence or skill level. We do not develop without learning. Our curiosity motivates exploration, risk, and facing the new or unfamiliar—all challenges that lead to learning. The meaning of the word “challenge,” from a cross-cultural point of view, is an invitation to grow or extend beyond what is presently knowable or familiar. It is interesting to note that in hindsight, we often refer to our challenges or learnings as blessings in disguise or wake-up calls.

Introduction

We are continually learning about ourselves, each other, our immediate environments, our communities, and the world. “What did I learn today?” is a profound question. It is from our learnings that we are able to bring forward and understand what is meaningful for us. The poet and novelist Marge Piercy sums up the crucible of learning this way: “Life is the first gift, love is the second, and understanding is the third.” Our learnings and the understandings we derive from them form a universal portal that engenders gratitude for all the ways we learn, including initiation rituals or rites of passage that occur worldwide.

Mercies

To be merciful is to have a disposition of kindness and compassion that bestows unexpected forgiveness or clemency. Mercy alleviates distress through acts of charity or benevolence. Merciful acts generate thankfulness, both in those who have initiated the acts and those who have benefited from them.

Mercy and forgiveness are closely tied; forgiveness is an act of generosity and compassion that fosters mercy. When we extend acts of kindness and compassion to ourselves and others, we cultivate mercy and open more easily to our own forgiveness work—forgiving ourselves for the harm we have caused and forgiving those who have harmed us. Making amends and extending a genuine apology foster the experience of atonement, “at-one-ment.” Anyone who has ever received the gift of forgiveness knows that it is one of the greatest gifts they can receive, and their gratitude emerges spontaneously.

Living in Gratitude

Protections

Inherent in all humans is the instinct to protect ourselves and others, especially those we love—to keep ourselves and others safe from harm, injury, or attack. Every culture has practices, prayers, rituals, and invocations for protection. Housewarmings are blessing and protection rituals, as are ribbon-cutting ceremonies: in cutting the ribbon before walking into a new workplace, we ask for blessings and protections to cut away the old and open to the new. Worldwide, parents bless their children to keep them safe, and remain vigilant in their efforts to keep them from harm. Feeling protected always engenders gratitude, and this is not limited to those who protect us in the seen world such as our elders, or others who may choose to watch out for us. We also call on the help of ancestors, the Mystery, and spiritual figures such as saints and angels for protection.

These universal portals of blessings, learnings, mercies, and protections offer the human spirit the gift of awareness, the ability to recognize all those things that can inspire gratitude amid the paradox of life's happiness and suffering. As Robert Emmons reminds us in his book *Thanks!*, whether we are happy or suffering, "Gratitude is the way the heart remembers—remembers kindnesses, cherished interactions with others, compassionate actions of strangers, surprise gifts, and everyday blessings. By remembering we honor and acknowledge the many ways in which who and what we are has been shaped by others, both living and dead." We can understand the magnitude of gratitude's power when we consider how the intention of thankfulness corresponds

with the deepest human realities of connection, creativity, healing, and wholesomeness.

The Benefits of Gratitude in the Four Quadrants of Life

One of the great benefits of a gratitude practice is the ability to track how the four universal portals of gratitude appear in our lives. When we do this, we find that the benefits of gratitude practice are multidimensional. Four quadrants of life experience, which human beings experience cross-culturally, are health and well-being; work environments and communities; financial stability; and relationships. Two other areas of human experience—character development and spiritual growth—are influenced by, and in turn influence, all four quadrants. As a result, gratitude practice in the Four Quadrants of Life also benefits our personal evolution.

Benefits for Health and Well-Being

Our physical state is fertile ground for the four portals to gratitude. We may be thankful that we have learned how to nourish our bodies; that we are protected from once-serious diseases, now eradicated from our modern world; that we have been nursed through an illness with kindness and compassion and that, emerging from this suffering, we are once again blessed with health and well-being.

Dr. Michael McCullough of the University of Miami and Dr. Robert Emmons of the University of California, Davis are among researchers investigating the effects of gratitude

Living in Gratitude

practice. Their studies have shown that regularly and deliberately expressing appreciation and genuine thankfulness improves health and well-being. Study participants who kept gratitude journals and practiced self-guided exercises slept better, exercised more, experienced increased positive emotions, progressed toward personal goals more quickly, and helped others more often. In *Words for Gratitude*, Dr. Emmons and Joanna Hill write, “We have learned from research that grateful people elicit more support from others. They cope better, have better health, and are more socially adaptable. This strong data supports grateful behavior. The key is learning how to make it a part of our experience.”

Benefits for Work Environments and Communities

Work is what we have come here to do: our contribution to the world, our purpose, our calling. As Kahlil Gibran said, “Work is love made visible.” For some people—technology workers, for example—work may involve maintaining and sustaining the systems that lend efficiency to our modern lives. These are the people whose work keeps the world connected and informed. For artists, work means nurturing creativity and inspiration and generating original images, songs, or other objects of beauty. For still others, work is entwined with service; health care professionals and social workers engage in work in this way. We may fit into more than one of these categories simultaneously—doing technical work by day and volunteer work in the evening, for example—or we may fit neatly into one category early in our work life and switch to another at midlife.