

Conscious Being

Reading Six: The Power of Gratitude

From Chapter 7 of Conscious Recovery

The Power of Gratitude

Gratitude may be one of the most talked-about spiritual principles there is, and many of us have learned that gratitude is a powerful tool for spiritual awakening and recovery. Many of us make gratitude lists, or keep a gratitude journal. This is wonderful. It teaches us to feel grateful, to be more open to positivity. That's very important for those of us working to let go of the emotional habits left over from our core false beliefs. If we're working on unlearning, if we're letting go of our stories of victimization, if we're trying to stop living as if the world is doing something to us, then we can strengthen our gratitude by finding something to be grateful for in every situation, finding whatever light appears in the midst of the darkness. For there is always light.

From that insight, I want to take things a little deeper by talking about the tendency to force gratitude. Sometimes it seems like "living in gratitude" means we need to feel perpetually grateful. Our desire to be grateful might lead us to believe that we need to feel love for and harmony with everything and everyone, 24-7. Some spiritual communities, for example, seem to want to focus only on the light, to call everything good without addressing the deeper shadow, or the darkness. When we talk only about love and light without also addressing some of the more difficult experiences we have, it

only adds to that familiar pressure to always pretend to be happy, which can be inauthentic. And it isn't authentic to force feelings that aren't truly there.

This brings us back to the power of authenticity. What would it be like to be grateful for all aspects of ourselves—not just those things that look like love and light but also the aspects of our shadow? Those things are part of our experience. It's all fuel for transformation. Those parts of ourselves that we would like to change or shift can be helped by holding a space of gratitude, rather than trying to bury them. The more we can be grateful for it all, the less blocked we are by shame and blame. This in turn fuels our authenticity. When we are grateful for all experiences, all aspects of ourselves, not just for those things that seem "good," then we have more courage to let others see all of us, which in turn invites more love and connection and more opportunities to rectify those things that need healing. So, gratitude feeds authenticity and authenticity feeds gratitude, in ever-widening circles of love and connection.

It's great to be able to feel gratitude for the "good" things even in the midst of a terrible situation—the community that came together to support those hurt in a hurricane or the policy changes that occurred after a terrible injustice. However, the limit to this approach is that it still categorizes everything: "This was bad, but I'm going to find the good." As soon as we have a feeling of wrongness, of judging the perceived perpetrator, or identifying the heroes in the situation, immediately that judgment solidifies the idea that we are separate. So even our practice of gratitude can end up strengthening duality, judgment, and inauthenticity, rather than focusing on oneness.

Being Gratitude

Our growing awareness can help us when we fall into this pattern. If you become aware that your practice of gratitude is limited and limiting in this way, it may be time to move into a deeper practice: not just being grateful for things, not just feeling gratitude, but becoming gratitude. At this level, gratitude is not only a feeling—it's also a way of seeing and of being. It's a state of gratitude not only for the world, but in the world. When we're in the midst of a difficult situation, being gratitude means honoring the difficulty, acknowledging the feelings of anger, sadness, or frustration, and yet at the same time tapping into the ultimate truth of who and what we are and living from an ultimate allowance of what is. To be gratitude, we don't need anything to change in the outer realm. Nor do we need to change our experience of difficulty or to shut down our feelings.

As our inner vibration of gratitude grows, it manifests more in the outer world, which matches our inner vibration and gives us more and more things to be grateful for. In other words, the more we practice gratitude, the more life seems to give us to be grateful for. Even when things we desire have not manifested yet, we can be grateful for their approach, for their transpiring. And this gratitude changes our perspective and thus changes reality.

Another aspect of the power of gratitude lies in our awareness of ultimate truth, which we have been discussing throughout this book. When we can know, and have a feeling tone of our oneness with Spirit, then we can be grateful not only for the things that we see, but also for the healing that we know and trust is happening all around the world. So, I invite you to open to the possibility that you can live in a space of open-hearted awareness and be gratitude in the world. Living this way will free you from the need to reject

any situation, person, or memory; it allows you to stand in the midst of anything happening and welcome it all.

In some situations, this might mean “finding the good in all of life,” or it might mean tapping into that ultimate truth and living from ultimate acceptance of what is. It's a continuous process. In order to be gratitude, we continually check back in with our oneness with Source. It's a moment by moment choice. Whenever we recognize that we're judging, whenever we recognize that we're looking at a situation or a person or ourselves with criticism rather than openness, we can choose to return to this connection, which is love and gratitude. In the same way that love and fear cannot possibly live in the same moment, judgment and gratitude can also not co-exist. Whenever we step into judgment, we've stepped out of gratitude. And, each time this happens we can choose to return to the more powerful awareness of gratitude.

I invite you to ask yourself the questions: “What is my experience of gratitude? And is it possible that I can be gratitude in the world, in addition to finding things to be grateful for?” “Can I choose to return, moment by moment, to my oneness with Spirit?” This is a new way of being and seeing, a transformational power that can alter everything in your life. I invite you to give it a try. After all, life is a great experiment. Why not try it and see what happens?

The Power of Compassion

Much of my work involves sitting with clients as they describe their pain and their suffering. I used to think

that my job as a compassionate counselor was to identify in their stories what was “wrong,” and then help them fix it. As I did my own work of inner healing, I began to understand that compassion isn’t about judging what’s wrong and helping to fix it, it’s about being one with the other and seeing our shared humanity. Pema Chödrön puts it this way: “Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It’s a relationship between equals. Only when we know our own darkness well can we be present with the darkness of others. Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity.” When I am willing to see beyond the story, beyond the behavior, and beyond the symptoms, something profound transpires. When I witness clients as whole and perfect, something profound transpires. When I hold a space for them to access their own inner wisdom, something profound transpires. As Rachel Naomi Remen writes, “We do not serve the weak or the broken. What we serve is the wholeness of each other and the wholeness in life.”

My first spiritual teacher, Mary Helen Brownell, once led a group of us on a pilgrimage to India. Our first stop, and the journey’s first lesson, was at LAX, where we waited for many hours. In the waiting area was a young mother who was becoming very frustrated with her infant and scolding loudly. Soon I could feel the judgment in the room as people became angry with the mother. Mary Helen diffused that tension quite simply. She walked calmly up to the woman and said kindly, “I was a young mother once, and I know how frustrating it can be. How can I help you?” She sat with this young woman for about half an hour. I didn’t hear anything else that was said in this interlude, but Mary Helen’s simple action had a profound impact on me. It showed me that we can either judge or we can serve. We can either judge or we can love. We have a choice in how we respond to life.

Some of us have difficulty imagining how this level of compassion is possible even when faced with something fairly minor like someone who is annoying us, a crying baby, or an unhelpful airline representative during a long flight delay. A deeper question beyond that is, how can I respond with compassion in the face of a seemingly unbearable injustice or intense pain? Yes, even then it's possible. When such an event happens in our own lives—or in the world, as it does so often—the first step is to feel whatever we're feeling as deeply as possible, and to honor whatever time this process takes.

Feeling Your Feelings

If you experience pain, then let that happen. Really allow yourself to feel whatever feelings are present. When you allow yourself to actually feel the emotions, they organically move through you rather than getting trapped or buried. When it comes to emotions, the only way out is through. Practicing this allows you to feel great sorrow and loss, even anger, while also feeling compassion. It also allows the natural, impermanent process of the feelings to dissipate after you give yourself permission to be fully present with whatever shows up.

Remember, feeling your feelings and responding in a conscious way is distinctly different than having a feeling and reacting to it. If you react to any situation without tapping into conscious awareness, you are simply continuing what caused the situation in the first place. Say you perceive that someone in your life has been treated unfairly. In response to that experience you might feel angry, and in turn you might want to figure out who is to blame, even to seek revenge. If you react from feelings without questioning them, if you actively identify “the person who did this” as the

problem, if you actively judge or hurt the person, it only adds to the aggression that created the original situation. You are only continuing the cycle of violence.

Feelings are present for a reason. They are the internal navigation system that is letting us know something needs attention. The issue for many of us is that we believe a person or a situation “make us” feel a certain way. When we become fully accountable for our emotions, we can begin to dialog and question the deeper root causes of our feelings. Are they coming from a story or an old idea we are holding? Is there another way to view the situation? The key here is accountability. When we take ownership for our emotional response (or reaction) to a situation, we recognize it is not the situation that causes us to feel a certain way. It is quite possibly an unhealed wound that has been touched, and with this awareness, we can find freedom in the midst of any emotional experience. In this way, we can begin to shift the feeling itself.

As a conscious being, your feelings of anger or frustration or vengefulness may still emerge. However, as you allow yourself to feel the emotions and practice witness consciousness, you will not be imprisoned by them. They won't force you to react in anger. If you have feelings of anger, you can choose to feel the feelings deeply, allow them to pass through you, then respond in love and acceptance. And the more you do this, the easier it becomes. Over time, you will discover that feelings, like anger, subside the more you practice this.