

Editorial

Gratitude: A Golden Key to a Hidden Treasury

Often we hear that our minds have so much power and we only use a small percentage of our brain. A hasty glance through the pages of the Guinness Book of World Records or a casual surfing of the countless uploads on YouTube will reveal the amazing skills our sisters and brothers have managed to develop through diligent practice. These ‘smart people’ do not necessarily have better brains or talents; they just use their brain and talents more often than the rest of us. The more they do, either mentally or physically, the more they are capable of doing, and the easier it is to do whatever they set out to do. Jesus relates this basic law of nature as follows: “For whoever has, to him more shall be given; and whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him” (Mk 4:25; Mt 13:12). Happiness leads to more happiness! Jesus elaborates this universal law further: “For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened” (Mt 7:8; Lk 11:10). The fact is that, whatever we focus on, we magnify. If we focus on what is good, more good will appear. Focus on what is wrong, and more will go wrong.

The scholars in the field of positive psychology, through their experiments, often provide convincing proofs for the amazing physical and psychological benefits of gratitude. Gratitude as both a mental technique and a way of life allows us to decrease, and then virtually eliminate, all negative emotions such as anger, fear, anxiety, and dissatisfaction. Simultaneously we build up a tide of

pure joy within which eventually makes us sing, dance and even burst out at unexpected moments, exclaiming 'Hallelujah' when the joy overflows.

A Million Reasons to be Happy

Most people feel that they can only be happy when things are going well in their lives. For such people, they need a reason to be happy, something to make them happy. Inspired by the thoughts of Meister Eckhart, Johannes Scheffler [better known as Angelus Silesius] (1624-1677) wrote, "The rose is without why, it blossoms because it blossoms. To itself it pays no heed, asks not if it is seen". While roses are capable of 'living without why', many human beings feel that they do need a 'why' in order to be happy. Unfortunately often they do not find any 'reason' to be happy. They easily find thousands of reasons to be depressed, to be angry, to be remorseful, and to have all sorts of negative and insalubrious emotions, and hence obstinately refuse to be convinced that nothing is as bad as they think it to be. There seems to be a natural tendency within us to take for granted many of the conveniences we enjoy in our daily lives. We stubbornly claim that we are entitled to all that we possess and desire to possess, and that without these possessions we cannot be happy. However, the fact is that we can be happy any day we choose, whether we have a 'reason' to be happy or not. It is a pity that people fail to live in an emotional and physiological state that encourages their body to be healthy, gives them more energy, and helps them see the joy in everyday life. More to the point, there are a million 'reasons' which we habitually ignore or often claim as our entitlement, which could elevate us into a state of ecstasy and rapture, if duly contemplated upon. Our true nature is happiness. Sadness is merely a habit. The moment we dare to strip our sad habits, the celebration of life begins.

Think About, Thank About and Bring About

How can I be happy? The answer is: Live in the high energy state of gratitude. The power of gratitude is the 'Secret Force of the Universe'. The heartfelt feeling of gratitude contains magical seeds that plant the most enlightening, loving, delightful experiences to enjoy! The impact of gratitude is amazing and life transforming if we know how to tap into it. When we are in a constant state of

gratitude it works like a powerful magnet attracting happiness into our life. We need to start being grateful for all of the things that we feel good about. When we start to feel grateful for what we already have, we will start to attract more of the good things - more of the things we can be grateful for. Getting up every morning and saying "thank you" is a powerful exercise to start our daily journey towards happiness. The most effective foolproof way to keep people and contentment away is to start complaining about anything and everything. Gratitude is the magnet that attracts both people and blessings towards us. "Whatever we think about and thank about, we bring about." says Dr. John Demartini. When we choose to be happy, good things happen, and this is perhaps the best reason to create happiness in our daily lives. The most effective way to become the master of one's own destiny is through giving appreciation to everything we see, touch, taste, smell and hear every day. Try on one day, for the whole day, to see if it is possible to practice this. Through focusing on gratitude we can generate positive energy. Through the strengthening of our emotional muscle of 'gratitude' we can transform our life into a joyful celebration in whichever situation we may find ourselves. This goes beyond just 'positive thinking'. Scientific studies have shown that something occurs in the physiology of people who truly live in a state of happiness. Happy people are often healthier and are capable of leaving unforgettable imprints in the lives of others as well.

Choose your Life

The first step towards turning our life around is shifting and reorienting our energy in a different direction than what we are used to. For ordinary people everything in their life, whether it be joy or sadness, wellness or illness, success or failure, happens to them. They are either silent or noisy victims of these occurrences, or grateful or thankless beneficiaries. Things take place in their life without their conscious collaboration or deliberate choice. However, as we know, there are people who could claim that "I choose my life". The amazing lives of Sean Stephenson, Nick Vujicic, Jessica Cox, Kamlesh Patel (they are all on YouTube inspiring millions!) and their attitudes, are powerful enough to serve as outstanding examples of the celebration of life over limitations. We should start to count our blessings, or make a list

of the things we can be grateful for. The feeling of gratitude is potent enough to generate happiness in our life. When we call to mind the time in which we did not even exist and the great sacrifices others have made to keep us alive, we can be persuaded to dispel all our complaints and woes. As we advance in this regard even small things like a welcoming smile or a cup of tea can let our cup of gratitude overflow. We should learn to appreciate our current life and its blessings, and let go of the sense of entitlement. Learn to be grateful for everything that happens, both good and bad! Though initially this attitude may seem a bit strange, slowly we will be convinced of its legitimacy and benefits. The feeling of gratitude has a tendency to attract more good things into our life. This will initiate a shift in our thinking pattern. We are often taught to focus on our limits and limitations, failures and shortcomings. We might also have been focusing on our inadequacies and whatever our problems are. When we start practicing gratefulness, we start to go in a different direction.

Egocentrism to Altruism

Insatiability does not lead anyone to contentment or happiness; whereas gratitude transforms a negative self-focus into a positive other-focus, strengthening relationships with God and others. What makes gratitude the “magic ingredient” of happiness is that it takes us outside ourselves so that we can see how we are part of the larger, intricate network of sustaining relationships - relationships that are reciprocal. Gratitude is the positive emotional experience resulting from the recognition that another person has benefitted you. The person sees good things around him and this lifts him up, moving him to action which benefits others. Thus, whenever we feel grateful we are happier, and when we practice gratitude we are more content. Gratitude helps us to be altruistic, which has multiple positive effects. Gratitude improves one’s relationships with the human community and even with God so one can receive strength from other people, and even the divine Person.

An interesting experiment was conducted at one of the universities in the US to evaluate the physical and psychological impacts of gratitude on people. The participants were divided into three

groups: gratitude, complaint and neutral. The members were asked to keep a short journal.

The first group was asked to describe briefly five events they were grateful for at the end of ten consecutive weeks. The second group was to take note of five events that got on their nerves during every week. The third group was asked to list five events that affected them, but they were told not to accentuate the positive or negative. The results of this study at the end of ten weeks were remarkable: the gratitude group felt better about their lives and were more optimistic about the future than participants of the other two groups. They reported fewer health complaints and had fewer symptoms of physical illness than the other two groups. The participants in the gratitude group also showed an increased 'pro-social' enthusiasm, while the complaint group turned out to be bitter than ever before.

Gratitude versus Depression

Depression is a complicated thing, with an inter-related web of multiple causes and consequences involving genetics, brain chemistry, attitudes, behaviors, and interpersonal relationships. It is at times difficult for psychologists to determine the cause and what the consequences of the various aspects of depression could be. Depressed persons generally have a negative attitude and are frustrated with all the bad things that are happening to them. This negative attitude becomes a filter that focuses and amplifies all the bad things that happen. For survival reasons, it appears to be far easier for us to remember bad things that have happened to us rather than good things. Depressed persons think that they are getting a raw deal from life and that they do not have the ability to get what they want. Gratitude is the best remedy to alleviate depression. Depression is inversely related to gratitude. The more grateful people are, the less depressed they will be. The more depressed, the less likely one is to feel thankful for life. Depressed individuals show significantly lower gratitude than the non-depressed, since they maintain a negative recall bias when asked about past life events.

Gratitude increases a person's potential for enjoying the benefits of an event, and also the benevolence of people. A grateful attitude may provide useful coping skills for dealing with losses and other

stressful events, such as appreciating important things that we have previously taken for granted. Psychologist Dr Glen Affleck, of the University of Connecticut found that cardiac patients who blamed their heart attacks on others were more likely to suffer another heart attack within the next eight years. Optimistic people enjoy longevity and are found to be more resistant to diseases. There is ample evidence to suggest that hopelessness and despair can adversely impact the endocrine and immune systems hastening death. Conversely, being an optimist may help reduce the risk of dying from heart attack and other causes. The famous 'Nun Study' conducted by Professor David Snowdon, of the Department of Neurology at the University of Kentucky Medical School, found that the more positive emotions expressed in the life stories of these nuns (contentment, gratitude/thankfulness, happiness, hope and love), contributed to their well-being so that they were more likely to be alive six decades later. A grateful person is more psychologically healthy. Gratitude is the psychological equivalent of eating healthier and getting more exercise; character strengths make us psychologically stronger and help us to flourish. Gratitude acts in a positive spiral. The depressed person can start by simply attempting to recognize gifts from others in order to begin to feel more grateful. The depressed person usually has weak gratitude muscles, and it will take some building up to feel gratitude more easily, more often, and more intensely. The "fake it till you make it" can be very effective in this regard.

Delusions Regarding Happiness

Most people believe that happiness is something that we have to pursue and take possession of. People start chasing happiness assuming that it will satisfy certain unfulfilled desires. The problem is that each desire, when satisfied, tends to be replaced by a new desire. So the person continues to chase after something. After a lifetime of pursuing happiness, the person ends up no more satisfied than he was at the beginning. Thus, he may end up wasting his life. It is not our job that makes us happy or unhappy, but our pride and attitude towards it. No matter what type of job we have, we can find something about it of which we can be proud. If our job is removing garbage bins, still we can be proud of

the fact that we serve to keep our surroundings clean, and without us, the place would eventually turn into a rubbish dump.

Nurturing Gratitude and appreciation

By planting seeds of gratitude and appreciation we can harvest abundant fruits from them in days to come. If we can appreciate something that we had previously not been able to appreciate, we will be one step closer to becoming an appreciation master. By repeatedly practicing gratitude exercises it is possible to build gratitude. A first exercise is keeping a gratitude journal every day for a week, and then once a week after that. Simply list three things or persons you are grateful for. Another exercise that is particularly powerful is a gratitude visit. Reflect upon someone in your past who has significantly helped you, such as a teacher, whom you have never explicitly thanked. Then, write that person a letter. For maximum benefit, make a visit. The shortcut to creating our life the way we want it is through being happy now. If we can be happy right now, in this moment, we have achieved our goal of life. Whatever we do, whether we realize it or not, we do it to be happy. Happiness is our goal. Outer circumstances need not dictate how we are to feel. The secret to creating happiness is that we do not lack anything in order to be happy right now. We can choose to be happy. Since our unhappiness is not going to help anybody we could choose to be happy. By worrying about things we do not have any control over, we create worthless tension for ourselves. Some people worry endlessly about politics and world events – so much so that it affects their ability to lead a happy life, even when in reality, world politics barely even affect their lives.

Understand the obstructions you are putting in the way of love, freedom, and happiness and they will drop. Turn on the light of awareness and the darkness will disappear. Happiness is not something you acquire; love is not something you produce; love is not something you have; love is something that has you.

- Anthony de Mello

What to be Grateful for?

There are many little blessings that make our life worthwhile. Appreciating the little things will help us to develop a grateful

heart and increase the joy of our blessings tremendously. Living life with gratitude will help us to find contentment and comfort, no matter what the day may bring. We must discover our own reasons to be thankful today and our whole attitude and demeanor will change forever!

Let us try to be grateful for...

Our life: It is wonderful to be alive - a blessing that must not be taken for granted!

Our mother earth: How marvelous she is!

Sun, Moon and stars: Warm sun, cool moon and shining stars!

Our family: The sacrifices and care of our parents, brothers and sisters!

Our friends: How terrible it would be if they are not there!

Our relationships: Love gives meaning to our existence!

Smile and Laughter: How they brighten up our daily life!

Hugs and kisses: How those warm embraces lift us up!

Home: A roof over our head and a place to rest is indeed a blessing!

Our freedom: How terrible if we were not free!

Kindness: How blessed are we, because someone was there for us!

Memories: If everything is forgotten, how terrible would that be!

Future: If there is no hope, how depressing our life will be!

Our health: What a great gift indeed!

Our food: The privilege of having something to eat every day!

Our senses: Of hearing, touch, sight, taste, and smell! The joy they bring!

Our job: If we had none, our survival would be difficult!

Education: How blessed we are because knowledge is preserved!

Rain: If rain fails to visit us how terrible that would be!

Animals and plants: How we are indebted to them!

Failures: How much they teach us!

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