

An excerpt from *Your Ultimate Life Plan: How to Deeply Transform Your Everyday Experience and Create Changes That Last*, by Dr. Jennifer Howard.

The Attitude of Gratitude

Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others.

—Cicero

In creating a life and world you love, you'll not only meet life with a compassionate and humble heart, but a grateful heart as well. We experience gratitude for the *things* in our lives: a favorite rocking chair, our morning cup of coffee, or other creature comforts, such as healthy food and a cozy home, surrounded by objects that mean something to us. Yet we're also grateful for *people* who have been good to us in some way, whether they know it or not, such as mentors, teachers, family, friends, or even the checkout lady or the friendly bus driver.

Daily interactions can warm our hearts, and they're a great way to generate and energize gratitude. From a psychological perspective, our hearts open when we appreciate someone or something. This is a starting point as we work to embody gratitude.

We can feel grateful when gazing at nature's beauty; a mountain or sunset, a full moon, gorgeous flowers, an azure sky, a starry night. We're awed and openhearted when we encounter this expansiveness, something much larger than ourselves.

Yet in tough times, when it seems our life rivals the biblical Job's, it seems hard, nearly impossible, to feel grateful. This is when you breathe and engage in one of your practices or call a good friend, your coach, or your therapist, or get an energy healing, and be gentle with yourself.

Research tells us you can increase your physical and emotional well-being, creating positive social effects, by giving thanks. Dr. Michael McCollough of Southern Methodist University and Dr. Robert Emmons of the University of California at Davis conducted a Research Project on Gratitude and Thanksgiving. Groups of people were asked to keep diaries; one group simply wrote what they did that day, while the other group kept a gratitude list.

This study indicated that regardless of faith or religion, daily gratitude exercises resulted in higher reported levels of alertness, enthusiasm, determination, optimism, and energy. Subjects described experiencing less depression and stress, were more likely to help others, exercised more regularly, and made more progress toward personal goals.

According to the findings, people who feel grateful are also more likely to feel loved, and gratitude encouraged a positive cycle of reciprocal kindness, as one act of gratitude encourages another.

Not only can you choose to investigate your life, seeing events or states you're grateful for, but also, from a spiritual perspective, you can embrace and embody the potential of gratitude whether or not something feels good.

As we live more consciously, we eventually heal enough to see the larger picture, allowing us to appreciate this journey as a gift. Profound gratitude for our life experiences brings genuine humility, taking us closer and closer to God, Divinity, or Presence, the answer to our deep desires and longings.

Most spiritual traditions emphasize gratitude. From Cicero to Buddha, many philosophers and spiritual teachers spoke of the power of gratitude. Some Christian church liturgies have gratitude written right into them. For different traditions' perspectives on gratitude, go to www.YourUltimateLifePlan.com for a download of inspirational gratitude quotes.

Rabbi Rami Shapiro says, "Gratitude is one of the most satisfying spiritual practices I know." As with other potentials, gratitude can be cultivated. We can develop gratitude by reflecting on the gifts we already have. These reflections can be done for a minute, a day, or throughout a lifetime. We can be grateful because we're happy, but we can also be happy because we're grateful.

As we sink into the deepest waters, gratitude arises and permeates us. We can't help but feel grateful, and happiness becomes our companion. Not that bad moments don't occur—they do, but we hold them differently, more tenderly and wisely. Your heart begins to open, your belly relaxes, and gratitude appears. You begin to see and activate your connection to this Ground on which you stand, and from which everything springs. You may not feel grateful each moment, but you're standing on gratitude itself, which is ever-present Grace.

We then discover gratitude's healing power, see opportunity for growth in the midst of troubles, embrace the wisdom of beginnings and endings, and tolerate limitations. In these and a thousand other ways we see the unity of life articulating its sacredness in innumerable dynamics of relationships. We begin to breathe with the Universe.

According to Brother David Steindl-Rast, "When you are grateful, your heart is open—open towards others, open for surprise." He also states, "From there it is only a small step to seeing the whole universe and every smallest part of it as surprising. From the humble starting point of daily surprises, the practice of gratefulness leads to these transcendent heights."

Meditation: Gratitude

Take a deep Breath. Notice the rising and falling of your breath. Do this for a while. Allow yourself to be breathed by All-That-Is, effortless breath. Feel the support

of being breathed. Now breathe into your heart. Allow your heart to open to all the love that's available. Take it in. Send yourself love. Now send love into any situation that calls to you. Send love to anyone who calls to you, past or present. Feel the abundance of love available. Let yourself fill up. Now allow the gratitude to well up out of this fullness. Breathe infinite love. Infinite abundance. Infinite emptiness and fullness. In your breathing, send and receive gratitude. Rest in Grace and gratitude. Stay here for a while.

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