What is Gratitude?
by Angeles Arrien

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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 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, in modern times, 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.

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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 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. 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.