

THE ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

*Cultivating the
Art of Appreciation*

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THE ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

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*Know, son, that everything in the
universe is a pitcher
brimming with wisdom and beauty...*

*Each moment contains a hundred
messages from God:
To every cry of "Oh Lord,"
He answers a hundred times,
"I am here."*

Rumi

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'm so grateful for the many blessings I've received in Life... my wonderful, generous, loving parents; my two amazing sons, Luc and Adam; my family and friends, clients, and teachers, including my special friend and teacher, Eleanor Leatham, who taught me, in more ways than one, that "gratitude is the key that opens the door to the heart"...

THANK YOU!

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Several years ago I was in California working on another book with a dear friend. At the time, I had been single by choice for years, and enjoyed living and working alone. The challenges of this writing partnership came to a head one day, and I found myself walking along the beach muttering and cursing about why anyone would ever choose to be in relationship for any reason...!*!

I was so wrapped up in my black cloud of frustration that I probably walked a mile or more without noticing the sparkling blue water, the warmth of sand and sun, the gentle breeze...

Suddenly I saw that a school of dolphins was swimming and frolicking in the water beside me, heading in the same direction as I. They accompanied me for almost an hour, more than long enough for my entire mood to shift.

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First, I was distracted from my own problems. Then I began to really enjoy and appreciate the sight. Gradually my heart opened and I became aware of the sense of being blessed – and what incredible timing! My whole being flooded with joy as I began to understand that Life was offering me a gift – not only a wonderful natural sight and a reminder of Nature’s beauty, but also an answer to my question! Relationship, the dolphins showed me, was for joy, fun, closeness, and sharing. It was a dance – exquisite and sensual.

Life is continually offering us these moments. We have only to stop, notice, and take them in. Our own limitations to being nourished by Life are usually all that prevent us from being happy and fulfilled. As we shed these barriers, we begin to transform our experience. The key is the art of appreciation.

The art of appreciation is already manifesting somewhere in your life. When you become more aware of it, and learn to cultivate it, you develop the ability to transform otherwise “negative” experiences into ones that are healing, or even enjoyable.

Art = inspiration + creative expression

The inspiration for the “art” of appreciation is Life – as it reveals itself through Nature, through people, through thoughts or words or music, to any of our sensory channels: vision, hearing, touch, taste, smell... Yet the senses alone are not enough to perceive inspiration. Imagination must be involved as the link between inspiration and creative expression.

Imagination is our ability to move out beyond what is known and to explore what is possible... It is our imagination that allows us to change our perceptions and experience of life – to choose another reality – to create something new.

In his autobiographical ***Man's Search for Meaning***, Viktor Frankl states that “no one can take away man's ultimate freedom, which is the freedom to choose one's own attitude in any given situation.”

Appreciation starts with an attitude, an intention to see differently – from the heart.

*The men where you live, said the little prince,
raise five thousand roses in the same garden
– and they do not find in it what they are
looking for... and yet what they are looking for
could be found in one single rose... but the eyes
are blind.*

*One must look with the heart... It is only with the
heart that one can see rightly; what is essential
is invisible to the eye.*

Antoine de Saint-Exupery

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The art of appreciation involves a certain state of mind – a kind of mindfulness and presence that invites us to experience whatever is happening, as it is, without any attempt or need or desire to change it. This applies to both our external and internal experience.

We practise the art of appreciation, for example, when we see a beautiful sunset, hear the first robin of spring, or smell fresh bread from the oven. You know the feeling! It's there when we see a small child learning to walk, when we notice a perfectly formed snowflake, when we hear a magnificent piece of music.

Appreciation can be present if we feel the beat of our heart, the pulse of life in us, or simply become aware that we are being breathed. We lose it if we let our ego get involved – with pride, or desire, or criticism, with a need to own or fix or change.

True appreciation has no need. And yet it meets a tremendous need for a kind of soul nourishment. Indeed, it nourishes both the observer and the observed.

When we were children, not to have been observed or witnessed with appreciation, especially at highly charged emotional times, may have resulted in a kind of trauma.

Much healing of trauma occurs when this missing experience is provided – a witness who is fully present, seeing from the heart, without judgement or a need to fix – a witness who is in the state of appreciation.

The art of appreciation may involve action or non-action. At times, an appreciation of what is occurring will stop us from interfering, and non-action will be the most honouring choice. At other times, not to intervene might actually be an act of violence. A non-ego-driven impulse to act may result in action that creates positive change.

A wonderful story is told of the wife of a famous medicine man, Rolling Thunder, who sat outside in the sun one day, petting a small kitten in her lap. Both she and her visitor sitting beside her noticed a little toad hopping across the yard toward them. Suddenly the kitten jumped down from her lap and began to play with the little toad. The visitor wondered in silence about what to do and the thought occurred that, after all, this was Nature's way.

At that point, the woman bent down and picked up the kitten once again, leaving her visitor pondering silently about whether or not she had interfered with Nature. She turned to him slowly, smiled and said something like, "If I'm here, then I'm also part of the picture." Her appreciation of Nature did not prevent her from allowing her own feelings and impulses to be an integral part of the whole scene.

The inspiration for appreciation is all around us – in every moment. All that is required is an openness that comes from the part of us that is not ego.

It comes from a willingness to experience blessings, to see every moment as rich, to be gifted by Life, without needing to hoard or control or deprive anyone else. It requires the kind of balanced openness that does not distinguish between outer and inner, between self and other.

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Appreciation of other at the cost of oneself invites abuse.

Appreciation of self without regard for other causes abuse.

To practise the art of appreciation and gratitude is to change the way most of us relate to ourselves, to others, and to Life. The following exercises and practices will give you evidence of how this happens, and some strategies for cultivating the art of appreciation, the attitude of gratitude, in your life. The source of joy and love is within us – in the heart center. Appreciation is the key that opens the door to the heart.

Now stop the words.

*In the center of your chest
open the window.*

Let the spirits fly in and out.

Rumi

EXERCISES

1. Just Noticing (Mindfulness)

Sit (or lie down) comfortably. Take a couple of minutes to simply notice what your mind is doing. If your mind is aware of a sensory experience (a sound, image, smell, taste, or sensation) notice this as “sensing”. If you notice a thought unrelated to a present sensory experience, this might be identified as simply “thinking”. Close your eyes when you’re ready to begin...

After a couple of minutes of noticing thinking vs. sensing, you may also be able to recognize another category of experience: “feeling”.

This includes emotions (anger, fear, joy, sadness, etc.) and energy (calm, sluggish, hyper, open, closed, erratic etc.) Feelings are sometimes difficult to define, and may be experienced as colours or textures, or metaphorically compared to the weather (stormy, sunny, cold). Take a few minutes now, with your eyes closed, to simply notice which field of awareness is presenting for you from one moment to the next: physical (sensory), mental (thoughts, memories), or feelings (emotions, energy). There is no need to direct this or control it; simply notice what happens for you in the next few moments...

2. Breathing with the Universe

In the Mindfulness exercise, you may have become aware of your breathing at some point. Take a few minutes now, in a comfortable position, to simply notice the flow of breath as it enters and leaves the body. There's no need to interfere with the rate or rhythm of the breath, or with how the breath moves in the body. This is an opportunity to simply become aware of how the breath is doing itself..

After some time simply breathing and noticing yourself being breathed, begin to have the sense that the breath is a link between your inner and outer world.

The breath connects you with Life, with the Universe. It is as if, as you inhale, the Universe breathes into you and, as you exhale, you breathe back into the Universe. It becomes an exchange of life force. Take a few minutes now to feel this mutual breathing occurring. As you do, let yourself appreciate the connection you have with Life and with the Universe through the breath...

*Heart, how torn you are,
How blessed to plow down blindly,
To think nothing, to know nothing,
Only to breathe, only to feel.*

Herman Hesse

3. Toning

Toning is the creative power of the voice to produce a sense of fulfillment within self. It is a natural and spontaneous expression of feeling. As such, it releases energy and influences (reduces or amplifies) the intensity of the feeling.

The exhalation produces a natural release of tension from the body. When the breath is released with sound, the effect is amplified. Using your own pulse, breathe in and then count how many beats there are for the exhalation. Breathe in again and this time HUM the breath out, counting again how many beats... is there a difference? If you hum on the exhalation for several breaths, and then pause and become mindful, you may notice how this breathing with sound affects the way you feel, physically and energetically.

Now change the sound slightly, still exhaling “Mmmmmmm...”, but imprinting an attitude of appreciation on the sound. This is the sound you might make if someone brought out a piece of your favourite dessert, or whispered loving words in your ear. This tone is probably accompanied by a smile on your face or at least in your eyes. Try it both ways, with and without a smile, and notice how it affects you differently.

Tone this sound of appreciation several times as you exhale. Then become mindful again and just notice whatever you are experiencing.

4. Touching the Face

To really notice the effects of this ritual for self-appreciation, do only one side of the face at first. Then spend a few moments in mindfulness just noticing the differences between the sides of the face. Consciousness, it is said, loves contrast.

Sit or lie down comfortably when you are ready to begin. Using one hand, place your middle fingertip in the centre of the forehead at the hairline and slide it gently down the mid-line of the face, between the eyes, over the nose, and down to the chin. Then let the fingertips begin to move over the forehead as if to discover its shape and feel.

The fingers explore the surface of the entire face this way, very slowly and gently, with mindful awareness and attitude of interest without judgement. The fingers are getting to know the side of the face, its contours and textures, noticing temperature, smoothness, whatever is there to notice. Then go over the entire side of the face again and this time, be aware of the face noticing the feel and gentle touch of these fingertips. Let your face experience the interest and caring implicit in this touch.

After touching one side of the face this way for a few minutes, rest the hand and become mindful. Notice sensations in the face and elsewhere in the body. Notice whatever thoughts and feelings are occurring.

5. Leg Stretch with Touch

Modify the stretch to suit your particular body needs. There's no benefit from doing something unpleasant. Find a way to make this exercise physically pleasurable.

Sit with one leg outstretched and one leg bent with the foot placed against the inside of the outstretched leg. If there's any discomfort behind the outstretched knee, support it on a rolled towel or small cushion. Begin to slide your hands along the extended leg. You could coordinate this movement with your breathing, sliding the hands toward the foot on the exhalation and bringing the hands closer to the hip as you inhale.

Avoid overstretching or trying to reach any closer to the foot than is comfortable. As the hands slide up and down the leg, you could close your eyes and just notice – with the hands – the contours of the leg. For several breaths, let your hands explore the leg in the same way that your fingers touched the face...

After awhile, switch your focus of attention to the leg, feeling these hands touching it. Notice the quality of touch, the message communicated by the hands. Allow your leg to ask for exactly the kind of touch it needs to feel nourished and appreciated.

After some time, place your hands behind you, lean back and extend both legs out in front. Just become mindful for a moment and notice the differences between your legs. Notice, too, any other aspects of your present experience: sensations, thoughts, feelings... what's happening for you? Repeat this with the other leg.

6. Leg Stretch with Toning

This is a variation of the leg stretch with touch exercise. Begin exactly as described above, with one leg outstretched, sliding the hands along the leg toward the foot as you exhale.

After a few breaths like this, begin to add sound to the breath. The sound is “Mmmmmmm...” and has the quality of appreciation and delight that makes this a “tone” rather than just a hum.

There is a smile on your face as you exhale and tone and stretch. Notice how this feels as you do it. After awhile, lean back with both legs extended and notice how the legs feel different, one from the other.

Notice the whole quality of your experience.

After awhile, repeat the exercise with the other leg extended.

Variations to explore include changing the tone, or opening the mouth “Aaaah...” Experiment with different sounds or movements.

7. Body Scanning

Sit or lie down comfortably. If possible, read this over a few times and then close your eyes and turn your attention inward. Begin to notice anything occurring in the physical field of your awareness. There's no need to work at this or to make anything happen. This is not about checking or correcting or changing anything. This is just about noticing.

Notice your eyes, your nose, your mouth, your tongue, your jaw. Let your attention move down into your throat and neck, into your shoulders, down your arms and into your hands. Notice your chest and abdomen and any sensations inside the thoracic cavity. Notice your back.

Let your attention rest for a moment on your breath, on the flow of breath into and out of the body. Notice the pelvis and let your attention move down into the lower body... down the legs... into the feet.

After noticing one part of the body after another, allow the sense of the whole body to be present in your awareness. Just notice the general quality of your physical experience and any particular body parts or sensations that come to your attention.

Finally, come back to noticing your breathing and rest your attention here for a few moments before completing.

8. Embracing the Signal

Begin the same as for the body scanning. Move your attention throughout the body and notice anything occurring in the physical field of awareness. Then let a particular sensation in some part of the body come to your attention, perhaps something you are curious about or interested in.

This might be a feeling of tightness or tension somewhere, even a pain. It might be a more subtle tingling or a sensation of warmth or heaviness.

Choose a sensation that you think might be a signal, one that might have a message or meaning. If it is comfortable to do so, place a hand over the part of the body where this “signal” or sensation that you are noticing is located. If this is not possible, simply imagine a hand placed here.

Notice your breath and imagine that your breath is drawn to the sensation and moves next to it on the inside, The sensation is being held gently now between the hand and the breath. In this way, your awareness “embraces” the signal. Simply rest here and notice what happens. Perhaps the sensation intensifies or decreases; perhaps it stays the same. Other associated sensations may become noticeable.

Thoughts or feelings may present themselves to your awareness. Just stay here, gently holding or “embracing” the sensation with an attitude of interest and appreciation. Direct a silent “thank you” to the sensation/signal and to your body and your intuition for communicating with you in this way, even if the meaning is not yet clear. Just notice whatever happens.

9. Inner Smiling

This exercise is another variation of the body scanning. It is a kind of “mindfulness plus...” Start with a general body scan as described earlier. After moving your attention gently and effortlessly through your entire body, just noticing whatever you’re experiencing, rest your attention for a moment on your face and eyes.

Begin to allow yourself to smile, just a little. Feel the beginning of the smile, the first movements and subtle changes, especially around the eyes.

Place your fingertips lightly on the solar plexus, the center of the upper abdomen, just below the diaphragm. Let your fingers sense any changes that occur here when you smile, then frown or grimace, then slowly smile again. Do you notice how the solar plexus “smiles” too?

Move your attention back to your eyes and face and gently invite the smile to broaden. Do this as easily as possible, without any effort or strain. Imagine that this smile expresses genuine delight and appreciation, and that these qualities shine into any area where the smile is focused.

Imagine the smile moving from the face into the inside and back of your head.

Feel as if the smile moves down into your throat and the back of your neck. Pause in each location until you get a real sense of a smile in each place.

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Whenever necessary, remember how the smile feels by going back to the eyes and the solar plexus. Slowly move the smile down into the shoulders... into the chest, the upper back... down the middle and lower back... into the belly. Let an inner smile move into all the internal organs: the lungs, the heart, the liver and kidneys, the pancreas and spleen, the intestines, the bladder, the reproductive organs...

Imagine the pelvic floor relaxing into a smile. Let the smile gradually move down the whole body into the legs... the feet. Come back to noticing the smile in your face, your solar plexus, your chest...

Feel as if the smile moves into the arms and all the way down into your hands. Let this inner smile move through your whole body and let it rest in any areas you feel are in need of healing or appreciation.

After feeling your whole body smiling from the inside out, just rest for several minutes, simply noticing whatever you are experiencing.

Fluent

I would love to live

Like a river flows,

Carried by the surprise

Of its own unfolding.

John O'Donohue

10. Sensory Awareness

Sensory awareness is a variation of the mindfulness meditation that focuses on one or more of the five sensory channels: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching (the body channel, including any physical sensations and the breathing).

Most of us have developed a preference for one or two of the sensory channels and have learned to habitually tune out in others.

We may be strongly visual, for example, but disconnected from bodily sensations, (unless they reach the level of pain). Or we may be quite kinesthetic, experiencing and learning through touch, but tuned out to some degree in the auditory channel (not listening).

A mindfulness practice of simply noticing whatever we are experiencing (or imagining) in all five senses brings us a heightened sense of our experience, and of life.

One way to do this is to take the time to fully appreciate eating something like an orange. Begin by taking it in visually, looking at the orange with the eyes of an artist. Smell it and feel it.

Begin to peel your orange and enjoy the textures and smells and even the soft sounds that are happening. Slowly take a small piece in your mouth and savour it completely. Let your attention be fully absorbed by your experience of the orange. Bring a quality of reverence to the whole ritual, appreciating the special gifts to all the senses of this fruit.

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Even an exercise in creative imagery or “visualization” can be opened up to include all the senses. Imagine yourself, for instance, in a beautiful natural setting.

Look around and notice everything you can “see” in your minds eye, appreciating the colours and contrasts, anything in your field of vision. In your imagined setting, notice the sounds, the smells... Imagine touching something and feel its texture, or feel the warmth of the sun, or the ground under your feet, or the coolness of a breeze.

Our senses are a source of incredible joy when we let ourselves take in the beauty around us... actual, remembered, or imagined.

*Here is calm so deep, grasses cease waving...
wonderful how completely everything in
wild nature fits into us, as if truly part and
parent of us. The sun shines not on us but in
us. The rivers flow not past, but through us,
thrilling, tingling, vibrating every fiber and
cell of the substance of our bodies, making
them glide and sing.*

John Muir

11. Chanting Meditation

Chanting, like “toning”, allows us to energize the mind and body through the use of the voice. Different sounds resonate in the body in different ways. Consonants resonate differently than vowels, for example, and various combinations of sounds produce a variety of sensations, feelings, moods, images, and/or thoughts.

Begin by sitting quietly for a moment just noticing the breath. Feel the rate and rhythm of the breath, without interfering with it. Notice where the breath seems to produce movement in the body. Now begin to hum softly as you exhale, starting with a barely audible increase of the vibration in the throat.

Allow the hum to get a little louder, without straining. Let the sound end just before the end of the exhalation so you don't feel as if you're pushing the sound out. Rather, let the sound ride out on the breath.

After several humming exhalations, breathing naturally on the inhalation, change the sound this way: begin the exhalation with a hum, lips closed “mmmmmm”. Then slowly open the mouth as you continue exhaling, “aaaaaaah”, closing the mouth again to complete the exhalation with “mmmmmm”.

Chant this sound several times on the exhalation. Then just sit in silence and notice whatever you're experiencing. Be aware of your body, your thoughts or state of mind, and the quality of your feelings. Notice if you are aware of energy resonating in or around yourself.

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Another chant to use in the same way is the syllable “yam”. To make this sound, begin with “mmmm”, changing the position of your tongue to produce “nnnnn” and then “ya-a-a-a-a-mmmmm” on one exhalation. Repeat this sound several times. Just let the breath come in naturally between the sounds.

After several breaths, explore the experience of chanting “yam” several times on one exhalation: “mmmm-nn-y-a-a-a-a- mmmm-nnnn-y-a-a-a- mmmm...” Again, move from the sounds into silence and sit in the energy of the chanting as it continues to resonate within and around you.

The syllable “yam” is said to open the heart chakra. Notice how this feels for you. What thoughts, memories, moods or sensations are an integral part of your experience?



12. Walking Meditation

The walking meditation can be practised anywhere, indoors or out, alone, with a partner or with a group. My first experience of it was with a group of thirty yoga students. We started inside and slowly moved around the room, then outside into the backyard, and eventually back into the room. It took about an hour. I have also done it alone or with others for ten minutes as a way to begin a sitting meditation. When I am just “going for a walk”, a few minutes in a walking meditation transforms my experience to one of a deeply appreciative and spiritual nature.

A walking meditation can be practised in a number of ways. Here is one: Begin by standing mindfully for a moment, just noticing how your body stands. How do your feet relate to the ground? Notice how your weight is distributed, and how connected you are with your feet and legs.

Notice your impression of the distance from the soles of your feet to the top of your head. Notice if your upper or lower body seems to have more length.

Notice how your breath moves in this standing body of yours. Allow your gaze to soften, or close your eyes gently.

Slowly begin to shift more of your weight to the left foot, then over to the right foot. Let these shifts happen very slowly and silently say to yourself, “Shifting... shifting...”

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When you are ready to begin moving forward, shift the weight totally to one foot, silently repeating, "Shifting... shifting..." Slowly begin to lift the other foot... "Lifting... lifting..." Move that foot forward and place it on the ground as your first step... "Placing... placing..." Now the weight shifts again... "Shifting... shifting..." and the next step begins. Your gaze is soft if you need your eyes open, and your attention is fully on the body experience of walking slowly and mindfully.

At first, moving this slowly is not easy for your balance. Just notice how the body adjusts to these slow movements and how the mind influences them.

The pace can be adjusted or changed from time to time. Notice what else changes if your movements speed up or slow down; be aware of your breathing, of how the breath does itself as you move and walk... shifting... lifting... placing... let your awareness gradually expand from its focus on your breath, and movements, to include your entire sensory experience: sounds, sights and images, smells. Let your Witness Self enjoy and appreciate your entire sensory experience. To what or whom do you feel connected?

Complete the walk by just standing and tuning in... you may wish to follow this with sitting for awhile.

13. Music Meditation

Music is one of the great miracles of life, a creative expression of great inspiration. Certain kinds of music can uplift and inspire us quite magically.

The vibratory impact of music can transform our mood and state of mind, and has even been shown to have a healing effect on the physical body. Listening to music as a meditation may be powerfully effective in opening the chakras and especially the heart center, or in creating a state of balance, peace, and relaxation. Any kind of music can be used, but your choice will obviously determine the effect of the experience.

One way to use music as a meditation is to lie down where you can feel the vibrations of the music, ideally played as loud as possible without distortion. This demands that the music is heard by the whole body and not just by the ears. It is also wonderful to lie down, spoon-fashion, with someone you feel close to, and listen to an inspirational piece of music together, wordlessly, feeling the music play through your bodies.

If it is not possible to play the music so loudly, set aside the time and space to sit or lie comfortably, with no other distractions, and listen to the music, as if for the first time. Let all your senses appreciate the tones and flavours of the music, noticing the various moods and energy shifts, the colours and hues and textures and tastes, as well as the sounds of the instruments and melodies.

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The music may take you on a dream-like journey, evoking memories or images, weaving a story or a tapestry of feelings. You may wish to write about your experience, journal-style, following a music meditation, or share your experience verbally with a friend.

Some of my favourite pieces of music for meditation include:

Classical Music (especially Pachelbel's Canon in D,
Vivaldi's Four Seasons, Debussy, Handel...)

Jean Michel Jarré (esp. Oxygene and Equinoxe)

Music from the Mission (Ennio Marricone)

Yo Yo Ma Plays Ennio Marricone

Carlos Nakai, Native Flute

Gabrielle Roth's Trance

and others...

14. Four Directions Meditation

The four directions meditation is an adaptation from the Native rituals that honour the four directions as part of the Medicine Wheel of Life. This ritual can be done in solitude or with a group, indoors or outside. It is a way of honouring the elements and Nature, and honouring ourselves as a part of a greater whole.

Locate the four directions, east, south, west, and north. You may wish to mark each of these with a sacred object, perhaps a stone or a candle. A group can form a circle for the ritual. When doing this alone, stand or sit in the centre of an imaginary circle.

Begin by facing East, the place of the dawn, symbolizing clarity and illumination.

Feel your breath and be conscious of the air as it flows into and out of your lungs. Feel the breath as life force, as spirit, as inspiration. Let your breath merge with the breath of the Universe and Nature, with the wind, the clouds, the currents of the air. Honour the breath, the air, the East.

Turn now and face the South, the place of innocence, of warmth and fire. Feel the combustion within the cells as food burns to release energy. Feel the warmth of your own circulation and the fire of your passion. Let your own fire merge with candle flame, lightning, and the warmth of the sun. Honour the sunlight and starlight and the light of who you are.

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Face the West, the place of introspection, of going within. Feel the fluidity within, the blood, the lymph, the rivers of feeling, the tranquil pools within the cells, within the mind. Let the flow of your inner wellspring merge with the streams and rivers and tides of Nature. Honour the waters of the universe, within and without.

Face the North, the place of gratitude and wisdom. Feel your own weight upon the earth, the solidity of your bones and flesh and of the ground that supports you. Feel yourself merge with the earth and let yourself be supported in the lap of the Mother. Honour your connection with all of Nature, the grass, the trees, the rocks and mountains.

You may wish to complete the meditation by sitting or lying down on your back, feeling the ground support you, feeling the breath breathe you, feeling yourself surrounded by the gifts of all the directions, and knowing yourself to be a part of All That Is.

*Your deepest presence is in
every small contracting and expanding
the two as beautifully balanced and coordinated
as birdwings.*

Rumi

15. Hand on Heart

This is a partner exercise to do with someone you wish to feel close to. It is an intimate non-verbal way to communicate and to appreciate each other. It can be used as a ritual to begin or end a verbal sharing, or lovemaking.

Kneel or sit comfortably, facing your partner, quite close together. You may wish to start with your eyes closed, tuning in first to yourself and then to your partner. Feel your personal space extending to include each other. You may feel as if you're both sitting in the same energy "bubble".

Place your left hands over each other's heart centre, at the centre of the chest. Rest your own right hand over your partner's left. Either close your eyes or gaze gently into each other's eyes, and simply let yourself open to the experience.

Let go of any tendency to think about what should be happening. Just notice what is. When we have expectations we generally miss what is actually occurring. Stay this way as long as you wish.

When you feel ready to move, lower your hands gently and say "Thank you" in whatever way feels appropriate.

16. Active Listening

One of our greatest needs is for understanding, for being listened to without judgement, for loving attention. Perhaps the most difficult part of communication is listening fully in a way that honours the other and lets them know we're present. In our hurry to express ourselves, we often respond too quickly. Yet, if we simply listen, saying nothing, we may appear disinterested.

Active listening is an essential ingredient for good communication. It requires the listener to feel secure enough to be fully open to what the other is saying, without interrupting, defending, or reacting, and without "checking out". Eye contact is important, along with sensitivity to the other person's comfort level with eye contact.

One aspect of active listening is appropriate mirroring, including some mirroring of facial expressions and body gestures. This too must be done with sensitivity and authenticity. Verbal "mirroring" could include repetition of some of what the speaker says, or paraphrasing to indicate understanding, or to get clarification. ("So you're feeling frustrated about something I said ...?") The key is to be present, interested, and spacious "Please tell me more...", until the other feels complete.

As you listen, actively tune into the spirit of the other person and allow yourself to appreciate their essential self, as well as what they're saying. When you both feel complete, express your appreciation.

17. Group Energy Balancing

This is wonderful to do at the beginning or end of any group meeting. Even two people can adapt this as a kind of energy hug. If there are enough people, the group comes together in a close circle, standing or sitting.

Each person rests her left hand on the back of the neck of the person on the left. The right hand is placed on the lower back of the person on the right. Let your body position be comfortable, easy, and open.

With your eyes closed, or your gaze soft, simply tune in to whatever you are feeling. Notice your breathing. Be aware of sensations in your body, in your hands and arms, your back and neck, your lower body.

Be aware of the presence of the person on your left, sensing her energy. Then shift your attention to the person on your right and notice what feels different or the same. Feel your connectedness with these companions, physically – through your hands, and energetically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually.

Very slowly, bring your right hand away from the back and lower it to your side. Stand for a moment still sensing the person on your right. Then, very slowly bring your left hand down, still sensing her presence beside you.

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Bring both your hands palms together, prayer-like, in front of your heart. This is the gesture that goes with the Sanskrit greeting “Namaste”, which means “The spirit and light within you are the spirit and light within me. We are one in that spirit and light.”

Complete by opening your eyes to the whole group and saying “Namaste”, or simply “Hello!” and “Thank you!”.

*Drink life to its fullest. Stop looking for a miracle.
You are the miracle. You are connected to all life,
each moment, each day, each week.
Each experience is a wonder within itself,
uniting you with all life.*

Paul Brenner

18. Anchoring Appreciation

To anchor appreciation is to locate the feeling quality and energy of appreciation in the physical and subtle body... to embody it in a way that makes it easier to access and utilize when needed as a resource.

Sit quietly and mindfully for a moment, just going inside to simply be with yourself with an attitude of openness and loving presence.

Begin to think about something in your life that you think of as a blessing. This may be something that occurred in the past that, in remembering it, evokes a feeling of gratitude and joy. It may be something present and ongoing in your life, or something you look forward to.

It may be that a number of different blessings come to mind, or one special thing. Whatever it is will bring with it the feeling of appreciation. Sit with it and be with until the feeling is contacted and amplified.

Once the appreciation is felt, focus your attention on the feeling itself. Notice how it feels, this "appreciation". When you're feeling it, what do you notice happening in your body? Is there a particular place in your body where you feel the energy of this feeling?

Perhaps there is a place in the body where this feeling of appreciation seems strongest, or where it resonates most vibrantly. Where does it seem to be (or want to be) located?

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Continue for a while to feel the quality of appreciation and the energetic experience of it in your body. Now you might begin to imagine a visual symbol of the feeling of appreciation.

What image comes to mind that seems to represent the same quality of feeling? This might be something associated with the thoughts or memory you originally had about being “blessed”. It might be something totally symbolic... a colour, something from nature, a shape... Let your unconscious present a symbol, and imagine placing along with the feeling quality, in that particular part of your body.

Finally, add a silent word or phrase to this experience (of feeling appreciation, locating it in your body and letting a visual symbol connect with the feeling). The words may be something like “I am blessed”, or simply “Thank you”. Let your intuition offer the words that feel right for you. In this way, appreciation is anchored in your physical body, your feeling self, and your mind.

Whenever you practice this, you build the feeling of appreciation as an internal resource that you can access no matter what is happening in your life. Simply using the words, the symbolic image, and bringing attention to that place in the body where you’ve located the feeling will access the feeling once it’s anchored there.

19. Wonderchild

Your “wonderchild” is your authentic essential self, the part of you that knows, has always known, that you are precious, perfect, and worth loving... no matter what.

Close your eyes for a moment and simply notice whatever you notice... sounds, thoughts, images, sensations, feelings, breath... whatever. There is no need to make anything happen. Just notice whatever is happening.

Then, very gently, let yourself drift back through time with each breath...

go back to childhood, back further than the hurts,
perhaps further back than any memories.

Imagine that with each breath you drift in consciousness closer and closer to a point of light within your core. That light is like a tiny star, the star of your wonderchild.

Let yourself be drawn to that light and to the knowing that you are precious, whole, and lovable...

that you are safe...

that you are never really alone.

Know that love and joy are your birthright...

that you deserve the many blessings that Life is capable
of offering.

THE ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

Know that you are a divine child of the Universe, a part of the Great Spirit of Life. Know that your life has meaning.

Know that Life wants to support you and nurture you, just because you are. Bask in that knowing and in that light. Let each breath now expand that image of light until it seems to fill your whole being.

Keep breathing and expanding that light until it surrounds you in a cocoon of your own radiance. The pattern of your breathing now contains the imprint of the spirit of your wonderchild and continues to affirm this with each breath whether you think about it or not. It can be with you always.

Believe in your wonderchild and your self-image will change, your relationships will change, your stress level will change, and your enjoyment of life will change. Your wonderchild is joyous, trusting, open, curious, spontaneous, and appreciative.

Each time you practise this meditation, you can reestablish your intention to let your wonderchild inspire the way you live your life. Celebrate that you are coming home to who you truly are.

*Being fully present in our awareness
opens our lives to new possibilities of well-being.*

Daniel Siegel, *The Mindful Brain*

20. COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

I'm grateful for ...

I appreciate ...

What would happen if, every day, you expressed heartfelt appreciation for yourself just the way you are?

Try this:

Place your hand over your heart and say three times with feeling,

"I deeply accept and appreciate myself for who I am."

The more appreciation you can generate for yourself, the more you can give to others. Self-acceptance and appreciation is the most powerful generator for success, in relationships and in Life.

THE ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

*Stay here,
quivering with each moment
like a drop of mercury...
This Moment, every moment,
if it's genuinely inside you,
brings what you need.*

Rumi

About the author:

Donna Martin is an international trainer in the Hakomi Way of mindfulness-based assisted self-inquiry. She has an extensive background in teaching, as well as stress management, individual and couples therapy, and addiction counseling in Kamloops B.C. as well as many years of teaching yoga and meditation. She has written several books including *Seeing Your Life Through New Eyes* (with co-author Paul Brenner M.D.) and *Simply Being* (with Marlena Field).

Other books available:

Creative Selfishness

Remembering Wholeness: InSight Methods

Simply Being – a reflective practice guide for helping professionals

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