

In Gratitude – November 13, 2016

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When seeking sources for inspiration in spiritual practices, words of wisdom can be found in various world religions. From the underlying nature of the Dharma, to the wisdom of the Talmud, and the Old Testament teachings. Translated, the Hebrew word for gratitude, Hak-arat Ha-tov literally means “recognizing the good.” The Buddha taught that every human birth is precious and worthy of gratitude. The Christian mystic Meister Eckhart suggests that if the only prayer we say within our lifetime is thank you, it would suffice. It has been said that giving thanks is the most elemental form of worship, which is why I love the American holiday that is expressly set aside for giving Thanks. The rituals observed are simple, we gather with people that we care about, sit around a table to share a meal, give thanks for all that we have, which is connected to other living things and to the earth.

With the separation of church and state that has occurred in this country, I find it amazing that this one holiday seems to be one place that we are on one accord. I mention this because, this holiday is the first presidential proclamation given by Abraham Lincoln in 1863, inviting the American people to take time out and “gratefully acknowledge with one heart and voice, thanksgiving and praise to a bountiful, merciful God.” I think this was befitting a nation that had begun the year with signing the Emancipation Proclamation in January of that same year.

To feel a sense of gratitude reminds us that everything that comes to us is not so much something that we deserve, as it is something that comes to us by grace. It's recognition of the fullness of life, not just the things that make us happy, but the totality of living. It's openness to what life brings us, and to the lessons that we can learn from it. However, there are times when we are caught up in our frenetic lives and fail to clearly see that what we have is much greater than what we lack. But then sometimes the universe unfolds so that we're able to view life in a totally new context. It's at that time when there seems to be grace in the world allowing the right person to be in the right place at the right time. Gratitude comes with the awareness and an expectation that we will always be surprised. It's not expecting what will come our way, but our challenge is to be open to the possibilities of what life offers us, and in the process to be as fully ourselves as we can be. There is a circular quality to gratitude, it is recognition that we are alive and that if we can acknowledge the things that we are grateful for, we may be better able to see what else we can be thankful for. Moreover, as our awareness grows, so does our sense of gratitude and wonder.

It is learning to see the world through a different lens, and as we begin to look, our awareness allows us to see more and more. We begin to see how precious life is. We are surrounded by all the normal parts of life that we've ceased being aware of because we see them daily. There's nothing surprising any more to look around and see all that we have, all the joy that we experience, all the love that people offer us, all the beauty in the world, and amazing accomplishments that our culture has brought into our lives. In many ways we've lived up to our promise to make the world a better place for ourselves and others. So instead of immediately reaching out again for that next exceptional moment, what if we resisted that pull, and allowed ourselves to rest a while, and just become aware of what we're about and where we are? The feelings of gratitude come with intentions of acknowledging something or someone that

we are grateful to. Sufi poet Rumi tells us that we are guests on the great good earth, and our every breath should be one of gratitude. Each time that we stop in awareness, and as often as we feel gratitude, we exercise a spiritual muscle that says we're not alone in our communities of faith as we support each other. That's a good feeling in the best of times, but we must also have faith during the times of trouble. It's in times of trouble that are precisely when we are confronted with the fact of not being in control of circumstances. We don't know why some things happen, and we are forced to look deeper for answers and meanings.

However, we must be present to life and all that it offers, because if we can be present with life, we open ourselves to finding the way we need to go. As people of faith we are called to reach out to others to help us get there, and in turn to help them. Gratitude may come when we reach a point where we can look back and see what lesson might have come from such an experience, see why it was that way, and come to a place of acceptance. It may be that the very thing that comes from such a time is that we learn to see our lives in a new way, not so much from the view of what we don't have as what we do have. We may come to have a very different perspective on the totality of life. Following the force of life and trusting that it will get us where we need to go. We may not be glad that something has happened, but we can step back and look at the meaning it has had for us, and somehow find that we are changed by the experience.

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