

The Four Levels of Gratitude

Gratitude is an emotional perspective that can transform the way we look at life. The Wisdom Traditions and modern neurobiological research agree: cultivating gratitude is a powerful way to make us considerably happier. If working with gratitude is relatively new to you, I highly recommend starting an intentional practice, say, writing five new things in a gratitude journal every day. The more gratitude we can cultivate, the happier we will feel.

This blog post frames a larger way to think about gratitude. Each level “ups the ante” in difficulty: each one is a big step over the previous one. As you read these levels, be incredibly kind and compassionate to yourself: embrace whatever levels you can, and don’t worry right now about the levels that seem too challenging. Wherever you are in your growth, whatever challenge you can or can’t accept at the moment, you are lovable exactly as you are in this moment.

Level #1: Gratitude for the Big Really Good Things

This is the kind of gratitude that comes naturally to most people, gratitude for the out-of-the-ordinary windfall blessings of life. When something really good happens to you, be deliberate about savoring the gratitude, feeling it fully, returning to it over successive days. Use a really good thing as an excuse to cultivate as much gratitude as possible.

Level #2: Gratitude for the Ordinary Little Good Things

For many people, this is a hugely fruitful place to explore. Sometimes, say on a meditation retreat or a workshop, one exercise might be to imagine that the doctor told you that there was some big problem with your eyes and in a week you would go blind. Imagine the shock and pain of that. Imagine how carefully you would take in each little ordinary sight during that last week of sight—even seeing a rusty nail or a muddy puddle would be deeply meaningful in that last week of sight. Of course, the good news is that your eyes are fine and you get to keep your sight, but why don’t we profoundly appreciate the miraculous gift of sight each day? The same is true of hearing, smell, the ability to walk, the ability to eat & digest, the ability to go to the bathroom without devices, etc. All precious gifts, all would be tragic to lose, so why don’t we feel grateful for them?

As we begin to look, life is full of miraculous little things that make our lives better—forks, socks, sidewalks, dental floss, paperclips, flowers, bird songs, sunshine. Every good thing, no matter how small, is an invitation to gratitude.

One of the greatest emotional poisons in life is taking things for granted. To take anything for granted is to derive zero joy from it while you have it but to be devastated when you lose it—taking anything for granted is an effective strategy for minimizing

happiness and maximizing pain. Level #2 gratitude is a powerful antidote to taking things for granted. The practice of Level #2 gratitude is about appreciating all the tiny little blessings and miracles that are part and parcel of everyday life. This level of gratitude dovetails nicely with a mindfulness practice. A beginner in this might imagine that one might “run out” of good things for which to be grateful, but the one who is well established in this practice feels surrounded by countless miracles at all times. Albert Einstein once said, “There are two ways to live your life: as if nothing is a miracle, or as if everything is a miracle.”

Level #3: Gratitude for the Ordinary Little Not-So-Fun Things

Once somebody has some proficiency at Level #2, they can start this. At this level, we hit an ostensible paradox: why would we ever be grateful for something bad? This level of gratitude begins to subvert the ego’s reflexive grasping after pleasure and pushing away pain & fear. Ego and the strategic mind may not like this level at all, but there’s a deeper wisdom and healing here.

The Buddha taught that the person who hurt/insults/offends us is our teacher. This offending person shows me where I am still attached, shows me another one of my “buttons.” Thus, this person reveals to me a new fruitful direction for spiritual work. Any person or thing “out there” that rubs me the wrong way or gets under my skin directly points to places in me where my own self-compassion is lacking. Buddhism teaches us to release the outer person/thing in gratitude and work on what is not right within.

This is the logic of [transformative healing](#). The natural human reflex is to push fear & grief & shame away, not to feel them but to bury them. The more we push away these broken places within us, the more powerful they become. Healing is about opening a conversation with these broken places, inviting them to speak, allowing them to show up as they are. Of course, the initial experience of any broken place might be painful, and one might have to sit with the pain a bit before it starts to move. The more completely we can allow a broken place to be exactly as it is, to surrender to it as it is and feel it fully, the more completely it will be able to heal and integrate. Gratitude is a kind of magic secret sauce in this process—gratitude for the healing process, for the opportunity to do more healing work, even gratitude for each little step forward of a previously disconnected broken place, all promote fuller and deeper healing.

Healing work of this sort is deep. Especially at first, it requires a powerful container, either a well-established spiritual practice and/or the support of a professional or guide who can help you.

As you might be able to imagine, insofar as I can replace long-standing emotional blocks with vitality & gratitude, there is a kind of “break the bank” abundance to the whole of one’s life.

Level #4: Gratitude for the Life Tragedies

This is certainly the advanced course, and there is nothing quick or simple about this. This easily could be the work of a lifetime.

One way to look at this is in terms of the Teaching. All things contain the Teaching. Small everyday challenges provide ones with little Teachings, little ways that I have to overcome attachments, as discussed in Level #3. The most potent Teachings are often the shattering experiences of life, the massive heartbreaks. I might have to take years to recover from the painful experience until I am ready even to begin to assimilate the Teaching. Those potent Teachings are soul-lessons, whole-lifetime kinds of Teachings. Once I have recovered enough to look back at the painful experience with equanimity—which, again, may take years—then gratitude is the magical perspective that most fully opens me to receive the wisdom, the Teaching, at the core of such an experience. Practicing gratitude of this sort allows one to begin to integrate whole-life lessons.

Conclusion

Having read this far, be kind to yourself. Love yourself exactly as you are in this moment. Love everything you are feeling in this moment. Be grateful for all your strengths and all your gifts. Remember how many people in this life are grateful for the preciousness of who you are and everything that your presence brings to the world.