

The Power of Gratitude



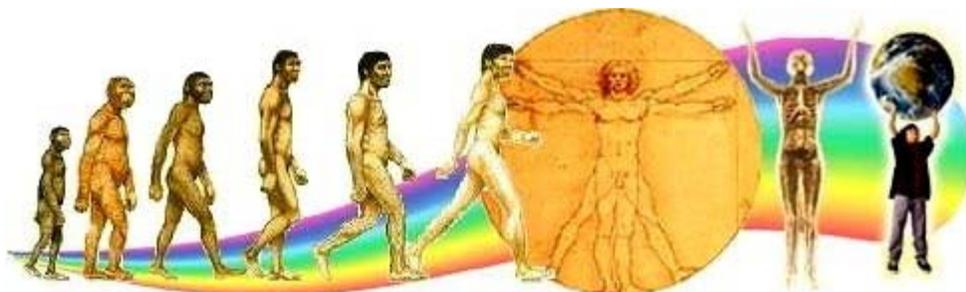
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Why Do Personal Development?

Part of the nature of humans is to be constantly developing, growing and moving toward a balanced and mature way of being. Our present personality is determined by both who and what we have been and by the person we strive to become. The goal of personal development is to learn and apply that which enables us to attain emotional wellbeing, understanding and effectiveness, and to share this knowledge with others.

Personal development is the conscious evolution of human nature, and yet throughout history it has been sorely lacking! Although it is in our nature to learn and grow, we are held back by our culture, which is predominantly focused on survival needs, each of us in competition with others, and our spiritual inner nature is repressed. The animal rules. We make no room for unconditional love.

Even though the culture may have evolved with technological advancement and administrative complexity, human nature has not moved forward as it might. We are now paying the price for human selfishness and inconsideration. Going forward, the quality of our lives on this planet - even our survival - now depends on each of us taking responsibility for our personal growth.

The human being needs to awaken to the soul that inhabits each body and is our true self and source of inner knowing. Awaken through a process of self-discovery, leading to one's own, self-directed spirituality. We need to become mindfully conscious instead of ruled by the dictates of instincts, past habits and fixed beliefs. We need to throw away dogma, open our minds and reconsider. Instead of fear about our survival and competitive angst, we will then be motivated by compassionate understanding and creative love.

For those that do move forward, the next epoch - that is almost upon us as we move into 2012 - will be a celebration of human cooperation and shared love. It's our best hope for the future - and it's in our hands.

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The Power of Gratitude

Why can't you be more grateful? It's likely that at some point you've heard this remark from a parent, grandparent or have even uttered these words to a child yourself. (Or even worse, a partner!) Our need to see gratitude in others is a huge part of us seeing that person also as a loving, caring person.

Having gratitude helps us to enjoy life more. It can break through huge barriers and reduce our stress-load, give us more confidence and help us to meet our goals - no matter how big they may be.

There is now doubt that being grateful goes a long way. It's just how to be grateful in times of stress or when suffering from disappointment or sadness that's difficult.

All you Need to do is Breathe

Often we get caught up in a vicious cycle of "if onlys." If only the job came through, then we'd be grateful, if only the kids were better behaved, then we'd say thanks, if only I could lose that extra ten pounds, get that guy to notice me, find a million dollars under my pillow... if only, if only, if only...

The problem with "if only" is that if and when the "if only" happens, we often just move onto the next thing we want to get, without stopping to say thanks. Or we focus so much on that hopeful "if only," we forget to recognize all the other things we have in our lives to be thankful for.

So let's start with the basics... right here, right now. There is so much each of us has to be grateful for. We just often forget to focus on the good bits.



Sit quietly. Take a large breath into your lungs. Let it fill you up completely. Don't let any of it out. Take a few top-up breaths. Feel the sensation of it filling your body. Breathe until you cannot fit in any more air.

Now hold the air in. Feel the sensation of it feeling tight inside your body. It may feel slightly uncomfortable. It may feel like you are about to burst.

Then let the air out. Let it rush out, then push the last amount out completely until there is nothing left.

The Gift of Being Able to Breathe

How did it feel when you were finally allowed to release the air? Good? Like a release?

If you are struggling to find anything to be grateful for at all, start with your breath. It gives us oxygen, the chief nutrient for our body. Without it we cannot survive. It reminds us we are alive. And that alone is an outstanding thing to be thankful for.

The drive to survive is far stronger than anything else. Your world may be crashing down around you, with creditors calling, relationships failing, and stress overload. But if you have breath, if you are alive, you are at a point where you can overturn all of that and start again.

Try the exercise again. Do it several times in a row, taking in slow breaths then releasing it slowly with that pause in the middle. Try it with your eyes closed and let it still you.

Have gratitude for your ability to breathe.



And After We Breathe? Then What?

Gratitude can change our lives hugely. But first we need to take a look at where we are right now. In fact we possibly need to do a little navel gazing, and let it all hang out a little.

Often we are not honest about what parts of life we don't feel grateful in. We know we're meant to be thankful and we don't want to admit that we're not. It all feels a little naughty.

So spend some time taking a little look inside your life over a range of areas.

Make a little list. Think about the following and come up with one chief thing you are not thankful for about it (if there is one), and one chief thing you ARE thankful for (if you can).



Perhaps these ideas can help you start your own Gratitude List or Journal ...

Your finances

Do you feel you have enough? Do you think it's managed well?
Do you feel a lack of money is affecting other areas?

Your work life

Do you enjoy your job? What parts do you like? Where is it taking you? Is there any part of you that is still wanting more from your job? In what way?

Your love life/ social life

Do you feel fulfilled and happy in this area? Do you feel loved and accepted for whom you are? Have you got great friends?

Your goals

Do you have goals? Do you have a sense of where you are headed and do you know how to get there? Do you feel your goals are realistic for what you want to do and where you want to be?

Your physical life

Are you comfortable in your body? What parts are working well? What isn't doing so well? Are you filled with energy? Do you enjoy the foods you are eating?



Your home life and possessions?

Do you feel you have enough? Or do you think you need more? Do you like the things you own? Have you got your favourite items that you treasure? What do you really long for? Is there anything?

Make a list of the things you struggle to be grateful for, and the things you already are thankful for. Don't worry if the complaints list is a little long. We'll sort that out soon!

How can gratitude get that moany groany list looking a lot lighter?

Well it's all so simple really. When we change the way we think, and start to fill our lives with thankfulness, nothing else is the same. We start to change our lives forever, and they DO get better.

The movie and book THE SECRET propelled the magic of gratitude onto centre stage with a simple formula of think of a thing, thank the universe for it, and it happens. While there are a few important steps missing in this (for instance, you really need to take responsibility and play your part as well for anything to happen) there is no doubt that the step of being grateful for the now and for the future does help.

So how exactly does gratitude help? Well let's take a look:

It helps us in social engagement

What on earth has happened to our manners lately? 'Please' and 'thank you' go go further than ever before, simply because no one else is using them! It's true and fairly sad in many ways.



If you are a parent one of the most powerful things you can do is teach your children to use manners.

And it's not only the words - it's the voice behind them. Parents often will tell a child to say it like they mean it. We as adults are no different. Use manners, and your world begins to open up socially. People watch us all the time as we engage with others. Gratitude is a way to showing respect to other people.

Think about the last time someone said thank you to you and you knew they meant it. It does something quite magical to your relationship with them. Someone who honors what you've given them or some work you've done. If they thank you for it, the first reaction is often to want to give them more. Because you know that what you give them will be rewarded again - or at least you hope it will be!

If we start thanking people around us for doing their job, for being kind, for giving us something when they don't have to, that makes everything run smoother. People gravitate towards people who they think are going to reward them for their actions. A smile goes a long way too. Smiling is an easy way to say thanks. If it's all you can manage, try a smiling at a stranger today. They are likely to pass it right on to someone else.

It's a bit of a coarse way of thinking about it, but if you really can't think of any reason you should be grateful for people who are just doing what they are supposed to do, think of it as if you are just greasing the wheels. What I mean by that is think about how much easier everything gets when you just give people a bit of thanks. Sure, they may only be doing their job, but it's far better than all those people who aren't doing even that, right? Thank people for the work they do, for any small kindness that comes your way and see how effective it is.



CASE STUDY

Andrew was going for a sales job. He knew he had the least experience and the least qualifications to get the job. In fact he wasn't even sure how he'd got the interview. What he did know was he was very thankful to be given the opportunity.

The interview went well, though it was impressed on him again that everyone else was more experienced for the role. As he left the building, he slipped the receptionist an envelope. Inside was a 'thank you' note for the man who had just interviewed him, thanking him for his time and for the opportunity.

That evening, he got a phone call to say he'd got the job. His new employer was very clear. It wasn't his qualifications that got him the job. It was the card. Because Andrew was able to thank the potential employer at this stage, he knew Andrew would be able to build positive relationships with his clients, which is exactly what he was looking for. Being grateful won Andrew the job.



YOUR ASSIGNMENT

Spend tomorrow thanking the people around you when they do something for you. Don't make it empty words. Instead, focus on what the person is doing and then thank them sincerely (and to an appropriate level. Bursting into tears, and hugging a waitress passionately is probably not required if they bring some free water to your table).

See how it makes you feel, and if it makes you more open to gratitude?

Try and make it a part of your everyday experience.



It Helps Your Mind

Once we are used to thanking the people around us, it's time to start being grateful for some of the good things working in our lives. This can be difficult to quantify, especially if you are under a fair amount of stress or finding life a bit tough. However there are so many things we have around us we take for granted, and often have no idea of the positive impact those things have on us.

As is true with human nature, there are so many things we don't realize the worth of until we don't have them around us any more. If you have children, you'll be aware of that sense of wanting your child to be asleep just so you can get something done without them interrupting you, then when all the kids are asleep, you'd love them to wake up so you could hold them, touch them and play with them.

Or maybe you have forgotten what it's like to live in your own place, without having your parents around to check what time you get home, or what it feels like to be able to drive somewhere, or go get a takeaway instead of cook...

There are just so many little freedoms we have that we take for granted. Find things to be grateful for.

YOUR ASSIGNMENT

Take stock of where you sit right now....

LOOK

Take a look around the room. Can you see things? Acknowledge your ability to see. Be grateful for it. Look at the colors around



you, how you can distinguish them from each other. This is something also to be grateful for. Think about the things you own. Are these the only clothes you own - the ones you have on now? Allow yourself to feel gratitude for being clothed. Are you in a place where you are sheltered from the sun or the rain or the wind? Allow yourself to feel gratitude for this.

Do you have any money on you at all? Be thankful even if it were merely a few coins.

These are all small points of gratitude. This isn't about trying to find large big things to be thankful for, but put together, a little gratitude over a range of different things starts to add up.

So why bother doing this?

If you make this part of your everyday habits - along with getting dressed, eating, drinking and all those other important tasks - then you start to focus on only what is positive and good. Doing this doesn't make the bad parts of our lives magically disappear but it does give us strength to cope with those aspects. If you are generally optimistic by nature, this can be enough to boost your optimism and keep you from stress. If you are naturally pessimistic, then this can help you move out of negative thinking and into something more uplifting.

It's very hard to be happy if we can't find anything to be happy about. But spending time being grateful everyday helps us to naturally become happier. It makes our happy state less 'up and down' and far more stable. This improved state of mind provides a raft of benefits from increased confidence, to decreased ill health, to increasing our enjoyment levels across the board in a range of different situations.



The key is to do this enough, so that it slips into our subconsciousness. It's said that around ninety percent of our behavior stems from our subconscious self. How powerful is it then when we begin to act out of gratitude rather than defensiveness or negativity?

It also becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. As we become happier, we naturally gravitate to things, people and situations that make us happier. In doing so, we begin to create a life that is all we desire and more. It's the true power of being filled with gratitude.



What it Does to Your Body

So we've got the people around us feeling a little happier and our minds getting the happy message but what about our bodies? What does being grateful do to our body?

Our cells are constantly changing, renewing and mending themselves. Many doctors recognize the worth of a positive attitude towards health.

In fact, if we feel good about ourselves we tend to look after our physical selves better. We make better food choices, eat to satisfy hunger and not to stave off sad or complicated emotions and we enjoy making our bodies move. A happy body is a healthy body.

Many obesity theorists think that one of the reasons that people in poorer areas are more likely to be obese isn't because they can't afford the right food, but because their misery for having no money, and limited resources impacts their emotions and drives their body to satisfy that need with food. And it's often over-processed, sugary, body-hating food they crave.

If your body isn't what it "should" be right now, or rather, if your body isn't what you want it to be right now, instead of focusing on the flabby bits, the sore bits, the needing to be operated bits, focus on the parts that do work well.

One of the fascinating things about people who suffer from some sort of impairment is that their body makes up for it in some other way. For example a blind person often has a highly developed sense of smell or incredible hearing. That is our body's way of being thankful for what does work. It compensates for and provides an enhanced talent to replace the one the person doesn't have.

We all have that ability. While most of us can probably mention many things we DON'T like about our bodies, what can you mention that you do like. Some of the time, we carry on shadows from our families' comments that impact us. They don't have to.

If you have a chronic illness, focus on the healthy parts of your body. Many studies have been done on the power of imagery that involves your healthy body fighting the health intruder. Spend time enjoying the healthy parts of your body.

If you feel absolutely terrible, and there is nothing you can do to feel good, then go back to that first activity at the beginning of this book and focus on your breath. Even if it is labored. Even if you need to do it slowly, breathe in and out and focus on your breath. Focus on how you feel alive with each breath you take in and out.

It isn't easy. Our physical feelings can often outweigh everything else. We often neglect how our body feels and then we stop looking after it. It becomes a vicious cycle. But to begin to be grateful for our health can liberate us from ill health.

EXERCISE

Spend five minutes a day focused on what is right with your body.

If you have severe body issues, or health issues, consider trying some EFT technique to help break the cycle and give yourself a kick-start towards positive feelings and gratitude.

Remember, no matter where you are or how you are feeling, you can love and accept yourself just as you are today.



What about the Bigger Picture?

For those raised in a home where faith was part of their lifestyle, the concept of thankfulness and gratitude is a big part of their culture. You may have been raised to give thanks before eating, or to say thank you to your God at bedtime.

One of the universal concepts is that we all need to be filled with gratitude in part because it is part of what makes the world go around. On the metaphysical level this is referred to as the law of Gratitude. This means that the universe, or the essence of life around us reacts to the thankfulness and it creates energy around us that impacts both us and the people around us.

As we are grateful, the universe responds by giving us what we are grateful for. This is the basic precept in the Law of Attraction that says the things we focus on are the things we attract more of into our life. The things you hold dear are the things you put your energy behind. The more energy we have around something, the more energy it attracts. It's basic physics.

So the things you may be grateful for - your friendships, your work, your health, your loved ones - grow and respond to that gratefulness the more and more grateful you are.

There is a proverb that says, "Out of the heart the mouth speaks."

Take a look at what you say and do. The person with a lot of gratitude in their heart speaks of, works with, gravitates towards and attracts people around them that do the same. An army of positive people can't be all that bad!



What About All the Bad Things?

So we've covered all the good bits of our life and we're focusing on them. But what about the bad things that happen? Should we be grateful for them as well? Well yes, if possible

Being grateful for bad things that happen to us, isn't saying that what happened should have happened. It's not about lying down like a doormat, ready for the next punch life might throw at us. Being grateful for the bad things that happen is more about learning to live with the life you've got, and seeing the good that can spring from anything.

If you look at people who are successful, often they have a tale of woe of how they struggled, were hurt, abused or injured. But somehow they rose above that and kept right on going. Key to this and to their overall success was to not see their situation as something that broke them, but as something that made them.

Being grateful for hardship. This doesn't mean that the universe is going to give you more of it. It's more a process of acceptance and letting go. You can have two people who in their lives experience exactly the same turn of unfortunate events and manage it completely differently. The person who feels gratitude that they are still alive, still surviving, still fighting, and has learnt from the lessons life has thrown upon them either by their own hand or by the hands of others, is the one who is going to be positively affected by having gratitude in their life.

CASE STUDY

Sarah was in an abusive relationship. She lived in fear for five years, and during this time also suffered from large financial problems, and had a near death experience due to a medical

condition. She cites the day she walked away from her relationship as a turning point, but she also looks back at the things that happened during that time and is thankful for those too. “I could see that I had allowed a lot of that behavior to happen around me and I had to learn from it. I look at life now completely differently from all of that time. For a start, every day is a gift. It’s not something to take for granted”

Nietzchse said “What doesn’t kill us only makes us stronger” While that is often true, it only works if you choose the path of love and forgiveness. Being able to forgive someone for any wrongs done to you isn’t so much about whether what they did was right or wrong, or even if they ever appreciate that you’ve forgiven them.

Forgiveness is about what happens in your own heart during the process. As you forgive the horrible parts of your life - forgiving a person, an object, a situation, the universe, yourself - you let go of the negative power that it had over you and you can start to be thankful for the person you are now, as a result of that experience or event.

It can be tempting to live the life of “what could have been.” However that just leads to a stronger sense of loss and hurt and it will be very difficult to move on from there. If instead you focus on how it’s shaped you, and has given you a different perspective others may never get to see, then you start to take on a more positive slant.

When bad things happen to us we all need recovery time. We need to look after ourselves and be gentle on our tender parts. But we can also look at the scars we carry and see them as little reminders of how we have survived. Battleworn some of us may be, but how awesome to have made it through to the other side.



It's like Weight Training

If all this just sounds too weird to relate to, think about what our body needs to do to become stronger and more resilient. If you want to build muscles, any form of resistance helps. The heavier the weight, the harder your muscles have to work to build up.

We use weights to fight against our muscles, to grow them. The muscles actually tear a little as we work them; stretch and then rebuild, connecting more fibres. The muscle growth doesn't happen during the session, but afterwards when we rest up and let our muscles mend.

To build your muscles you need to work them so they tear a little, feed them to give them the power they need and let them rest. The resting and feeding is just as important as the work out.

So how does this correspond with gratitude? Well if you want to make the most of any traumatic situation, where you've felt your heart and mind tear a little, then you rest after it, and you allow your heart and mind to heal and you add in some gratitude that you made it through. This is how we become stronger.

Being grateful that you've made it through doesn't mean that you are giving that experience power or importance. In fact it's giving the power to yourself because you are saying that you beat it. It didn't beat you. And that feels good.

Learning from our experiences, and our unwise decisions in the past, is about being grateful that you don't need to repeat the lesson again. You learn to read situations that others may miss, you can see things as they are, not as people try to portray them, and you change the way you see the world.

If you are reading this, and you've recently gone through something awful, then this may be the very last thing you want to hear. Everyone needs a bit of wound-licking time. But it's something that is good to keep in mind. This is about not letting our life's experiences control us in a negative manner. It's about finding a reason behind all the horribleness, about finding a gem of gratefulness and then letting go of the pain.

Sometimes we just can't see the bigger picture

When we are in the midst of trials and horrible experiences we often feel "What on earth that is good can come out of this situation?" It feels like a hopeless case. We wonder why we feel the feelings we do, why we are surrounded by the people we spend time with, and why doors aren't opening for us. It's often only with the benefit of hindsight, that we can look back and see how those times were the very ones that shaped us, that we can see it was all worth it in the end.

Often the very things we most long for will not show up in the shape we expect. To get to those things we often have to go on a journey that we don't expect and experience things we weren't prepared for.

CASE STUDY

Rosie wanted to be a writer. She did pretty well at school, and had a flair for words but nothing ever opened up. She took some time off from writing and focused on another career. Though a series of unplanned events she experienced a great deal of heartbreak and worry that changed her perspective on many things. Once again she began to write, and people commented on her ability to connect with others through her writing. It felt right and as something others could relate to.

Rosie discovered the pain she had experienced actually, in some ways, gave her the opportunity to be the person she had always dreamt of being.

To prepare us for the big dreams in our heart we sometimes get put into places and situations that build our mind and heart muscles. It might be a loss, hardship, pain, or death of a loved one. These things may be necessary to build us into the person we need to be to reach our dreams.

Look at it this way. Imagine your dream is to own a mansion by the beach. If you don't have the character you need to earn it, the pleasure will not last. You'll let it run down, or worse, you'll lose it. But if you are willing to let life create the character in you that means you could look after it, well that would be worth it, wouldn't it? Sometimes our hearts need to tear a little, build a little more muscle and so get a little stronger in order to reach our goals.

If you learn the lesson fast, there is no reason for the bad event to repeat itself. While we never stop learning, and never stop experiencing life, as we learn from each one, the less difficult it will be to learn the next lesson. It's a bit like those muscles - the more you use them, the more second nature it is to keep on building them and using them every day. The heart that is torn and then become stronger finds it easier to be grateful, and tends to attract more and more experiences to be easily grateful for.

So What Should You Be Grateful For?

Generating a list of everything we are thankful for can really help on those slightly cloudy (or downright stormy) days when it's hard to conjure up a pile of thankfulness.

Like anything, gratitude is a learned behavior. It's something we find easier the more and more we practice.

If you can't find anything to be thankful about, work your way through this list and use it as a basis to create your own.

Things You Own

You can feel gratitude for ...

- * Having shelter. I have a home to live in, a bed to sleep in and a place to put my things in.
- * Having something to wear. I have something to keep me warm when the wind blows, and clothes I can wear on hot days. I can be covered and I have more than one outfit to choose from.
- * I have shoes for my feet. I can cover them to protect them from sharp objects and to support my feet as I walk.
- * Having the means to travel. I can use my car (or a scooter or a bike) to get to places. I have access to public transport. I live in an age where it's easy to find a way to get somewhere fast if I need it.
- * I have a computer to work on, play on and communicate by. Even if I have to borrow the use of one, I can use tools on it to find out information I can use.

Your Liberty

I am thankful for:

- * The fact that I am alive.
- * The fact I can drink water from a tap and it's safe.
- * The choice of food I can eat to fuel my body.
- * Being free and not imprisoned.
- * Having the skills needed to read and to write.
- * The opportunity to learn something new and to change my life.

My Social Networks

I am thankful for:

- * Myself. I'm who I am, and I accept myself for who I am.
- * My loved ones. The special people in my life I've chosen to spend my life with, or give birth to.
- * The people who gave birth to me and the people who raised me.
- * My friends and colleagues.
- * My pets, for all their cuddles and our uncomplicated relationships.



My Successes

I am thankful for:

- * My innate talents.
- * The skills I've learnt
- * My ability to make friends
- * My job, or the way I support myself
- * My interests, and the things I enjoy to do for recreation.
- * My emotions.
- * My choice to love others, and share my life with them.

Significant Moments

I am thankful for:

- * Milestones in my life. Learning how to walk, to talk, to run, to laugh.
- * My special days such as birthdays and anniversaries.
- * Memories. Times spent with loved ones.
- * Holidays and time spent away from work.
- * Being able to order a take-out coffee, or having a meal out.
- * Any kind of pleasant surprises.

Life's Little Treasures

I am thankful for:

- * Being able to feel the sun/wind/rain on my face.
- * Going to the beach, or climbing a hill and looking around at the world at my feet.
- * Drying my washing on a windy day.
- * Seeing a stranger smile at me.
- * Watching snow fall.
- * Taking my dog for a walk.
- * Playing on playground equipment.
- * Laughing.

Things I never expected

I am thankful for:

- * The things I didn't get right the first time.
- * The doors that closed on me when I wanted them open.
- * The lessons I've learnt through my experiences.



Use this list as a starting point and add any specifics you have. It's a good idea to put the list on the fridge door, or somewhere you can see it to remind yourself to be thankful throughout the day. Soon giving thanks will be second nature and you'll start to attract more good things to be thankful for.



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