

## Uplifted Heart of Practice | Six

### The Heart of Gratitude

-Zoketsu Norman Fischer

We are sitting within Buddha's heart, releasing ourselves to that aspect of ourselves that deeply belongs to the universe and is grateful for it. I have been having some email discussions this week with my old friend and teacher Brother David Steindl-Rast about his favorite subject, gratitude. David has been thinking about gratitude for many years. The title of his most famous book is Gratitude, the Heart of Prayer, and now, in his seventies, he is getting very excited about the internet and is hard at work on an ambitious web site, called, I think, Gratitude. And if you are fortunate enough to meet Brother David you will feel his gratitude. When you meet him you will feel that he feels grateful to meet you, even though it might be hard to understand why. He just seems genuinely grateful for the world and all that is in it. He is a person with a viewpoint, very politically involved, and he has his likes and dislikes. But he never seems to complain, and gratitude is never far away from his thoughts and feelings. He appreciates the world.

He sent me an article he wrote about gratitude. In it he writes, "Do you remember a time when you went outside at night and looked up at the stars, seeing them as if for the first time?" He quotes Eugene O'Neil:

For a moment I lost myself – actually lost my life. I was set free! I dissolved in the...high dim-starred sky! I belonged, without past or future, within peace and unity and a wild joy, within something greater than my own life... -to Life itself! To God, if you want to put it that way. For a second you see the secret – and seeing the secret, are the secret. For a second there is meaning!

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Brother David sees this sudden and immediate sense of belonging that you sometimes can feel, and that I think is fostered by our practice, as being the condition of gratitude. When we see ourselves as separate atomized individuals in a world full of other separate atomized individuals, we don't feel grateful. Quite the contrary, we are complaining all the time because there is plenty to complain about. We have so many things we want and need,

and whatever we actually get is never enough. No amount of love or possessions or gratification could ever fill the gap between us and the world. So we're looking for something, thirsting for something, always dissatisfied. In Buddhism they call this trishna, thirst. Like hungry ghosts we are thirsting endlessly for something that we never can get. We are deeply restless and dissatisfied.

But when we feel suddenly a rush of belonging like the one O'Neil describes- something that comes really for no reason, something that we haven't earned or created for ourselves, but it just arrives, all of a sudden, out of nowhere, perhaps when we are not expecting it at all, we naturally feel a profound existential gratitude. Brother David says,

Why do I call that wild joy of belonging 'gratefulness'? Because it is our full appreciation of something altogether undeserved, utterly gratuitous – life, existence, ultimate belonging – and this is the literal meaning of grate-full-ness. In a moment of gratefulness, you do not discriminate. You fully accept the whole of this given universe, as you are fully one with the whole.

I think most of the time most of us feel as if we are looking for something. We go through our days and weeks more or less happy or unhappy, but mostly not really attending to our condition. When we do take the time to attend to what we are feeling in the depths of our heart I think we are rarely feeling contentment. Mostly we are feeling a lack, something missing. Sometimes we don't know what we think is missing, and sometimes we have an idea what it is. But I wonder if we ever actually know what it is. We think we want something in our lives we don't have, or want something out of our lives that we do have but don't want, but really I don't think that's the source of our restlessness. Because we have all had the experience of getting that good relationship or that good job or the new house or degree, and still, after a while, we feel again the empty space inside.

The other day I spoke to an old friend who has had a recurrence after many years of cancer. I think she is in a rather dire situation but she seemed surprisingly cheerful and upbeat to me- even though she had just had major surgery, and had, a few months ago, just lost her sister to exactly the same cancer she now has. She said to me, "I don't spend too much

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time on 'why me?' or on thinking about all the terrible things that might and probably will happen. I am just trying to stay with every day as I find it and to do what I can." She reminded me of a talk Issan Dorsey gave at Zen Center many years ago, in which he told people he had AIDS (Issan was a Zen center priest, a very outrageous fellow who had been for years a drug addict and famous female impersonator. He founded the Hartford Street Zen Center and Hospice. He died of AIDS in 1990). She said that Issan said, I don't say, why me? I say, why not me?

As far as I remember, Issan, like my friend, accepted his condition with a grace and cheer that was truly remarkable. Rather than complaining about what he had that he didn't want, he took pleasure in his condition, he enjoyed his health and his illness up until the day he died. Saying "why me" means we see ourselves as separate beings among many beings. We want good things for ourselves and we want to avoid bad things. Saying "why not me" means that we know that we belong with everything and everyone, we aren't separate. What can happen to any one of us can happen to me and I can accept it. It's not a tragedy and it's not a surprise. Gratitude is wide enough even to cover our own suffering.

People ask many times about suffering and spiritual practice. "How can we open ourselves to the suffering of the world?" they ask. "Doesn't doing that make our lives sad and depressing? Don't we need to be careful about compassion? Won't we get burned out and discouraged if we open ourselves to all the world's problems and difficulties?"

Well from the point of view of separation this is certainly so. If we see the world as separate atomized individuals all of whom have needs to be fulfilled, then it is certainly true that we will be overwhelmed by all the unfulfilled needs of the world, and we will feel that it really isn't a good idea to be concerned about the needs of others. It is much too difficult. Just seeing to our own needs is difficult enough.

But if on the other hand we see the world as a world of belonging, a world of connection, a world in which all things swim together as one, without edges and boundaries, like the stars in the nighttime sky, making one ineffable pattern, one continuous being, then I don't think we are weighed down by suffering.

It is true that our hearts will be tender, and tears will come to our eyes when we see suffering. Recently I was in Northern Ireland with His Holiness Dalai Lama and we were listening to stories of victims of the troubles there – a woman who could no longer walk, a man who could no longer see, a murderer whose heart

and spirit had been broken, probably for the rest of his life, by what he had done. And His Holiness cried to hear their stories. And yet, that same afternoon, only a short while later, he was laughing uproariously as he yanked on the beards of a Catholic priest and a Protestant Minister between whom he was standing for a photo opportunity. He was so overcome by hilarity, really it seemed as if he'd lost it! The picture of His Holiness cracking up as he held the white beards to either side of him was in all the European papers the next day.

So yes, when we feel and train in the fundamental reality of belonging we do sympathize deeply with suffering, but this is not something hard to bear. Because along with the sadness we feel a powerful gratitude for what is. We cry, but also we can see the beauty of what is, even in the midst of suffering. Where there is this true sense of what the world actually is, a vision we have of belonging, a felt sense of it, there is always mixed in with the sadness of suffering a wide calm feeling. And there can even be joy as well, perhaps the purest sort of joy, as we recognize the preciousness of life, and its utter gratuity: life is present in us and all around us. Why? Did we earn it? Did anyone earn it? Even when life is difficult it is still life, it is still connection, and where there is life, where there is consciousness, there is gratefulness.

"It seems to me that gratitude then isn't so much an emotion or a feeling as an actual fact, maybe even the primary fact, of our being at all. If we are, in other words, we belong, radically belong, are possessed by, embraced by, all that is, and gratitude is literally what we are when we are most attuned to what we are, when we plunge deeply into our nature, and stop complaining."