

# 2012-12-23 Choosing Gratitude

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

gratitude, grateful, people, thought, life, world, contracted, caught, remarkable, glue, close, appreciation, expansive, rogers, heart, meditation practice, sacred, deny, meditation, movement

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

I'd like to begin by reading a story from my book monastic, a monastery within. And this story is titled a monastic alternative. So chances are not a lot of you are going off to become monks or nuns. So maybe this is interesting. As a teenager, she often visited the monastery. She was deeply attracted to the monastic life. The Buddhist path to liberation was what had the most meaning for her. When she became an adult, she planned on joining the monastic order. However, when you turn 21, her older sister and our sister's husband died in an accident, and she became the foster parent of her two young children. In addition, her own parents had become quite old and needed her help as the only income earner in the family. She had to work long hours every day. She loved to meditate. But with all the work and caregiving she had to do, she had no time for it. Since she was not able to fulfill the respiration for following the monastic path, she went to the Abbess of the monastery and had asked, How could she follow the path with a life she had to live? The habit said that if she couldn't meditate, then the best alternative is to be grateful for everything. To be grateful for everything to be grateful. So it seems like a good time of year to consider gratitude, grateful for the year. And the Buddha said that, as I think most religions say that gratitude is a really important part of a healthy life of a wise life. Wise people are grateful and acknowledge with the benefits they receive offer their thanks. For me, one of the very significant aspects of doing meditation practice has been and still remains the gratitude that wells up from doing it. And I think people don't often associate meditation with producing gratitude and in the common associations, it helps people be relaxed, to calm, to get centered, maybe to have insight, a variety of things like that. But gratitude isn't, you know, automatically associated with meditation. But I would say it's one of the really important and enduring consequences of meditation for me. And I often feel at the end of a session of meditation, I feel grateful, and I feel appreciation. And then it's a reasonable question would be grateful and appreciative of what and I prefer not to answer the question. The It's a I just feel delighted that I feel grateful that we'll have to answer the question Do I have to be strict because I feel grateful to have to have a reason for it. The feel appreciate whatever reason for it, I mean, sometimes there's reasons, which are great. But isn't that wonderful that there's a, a, that there's a spiritual practice, or inner practice that somehow produces this emotion to state this quality, without particularly having a reason for it? Or perhaps the reason, which seems a little bit weak to me. I just say I'm weak, but also quite significant. I'm grateful because I'm alive. I'm grateful because I'm aware and present, just to be just to be alive. You know, it's pretty amazing thing. But as I've reflected on the movement, the way that meditation brings forth gratitude, it might be helpful to distinguish between two movements of the heart to movements of our inner life. There's the movement where things get contracted, closed. And there's a movement where things get expensive and open. And some certain activities of our mind, close things down, make us less available to the world around us less sensitive, less capable feel empathy, and less able to feel whole series of different kinds of healthy emotions. And other kind of movement activities of the mind act are things we focused on are involved in, tend to open

us up tend to be more expensive, and increase our capacity for empathy for caring for sensitivity for a whole whole slew of kind of more positive emotions.

And things like joy, love, empathy, gratitude, and appreciation are kind of like a package that seemed to come together. Other as the heart opens up, as we feel more expansive and open, and intend to go away as we tend to get contracted and tight. And so what is it that makes us contracted and tight? I think that preoccupation with greed makes us close preoccupation with what I want, trying to be in control of the situation in a tight way like you it is up to you and you can just get what you want or kind of take care of yourself in some way. Oddly enough, overly over over concerned with self protection, defending oneself protecting oneself hiding, not being seen, not having people know you, also has the same effect that it tends to contract and close down something. In fact, I think most spiritual traditions will say that excessive preoccupation with yourself is doesn't have good results and excessive preoccupation with yourself. tend to close things down. For one reason is that when you're excessively preoccupied with ourselves, it tends to we tend to live in a world of thoughts and ideas and concepts. And anytime we're kind of caught up in World of thoughts, ideas and concepts, it also has tends to have the effect of closing us down, narrowing us. One of the remarkable, I believe, remarkable insights to have with meditation practice mindfulness practice, is to see clearly that there's a difference between the thoughts we have, the concepts we have, the ideas we have, and the glue that keeps us bound to those ideas. Sometimes that glue is super glue. And when it's really close and tight, what we think is who we are, what we think is how things are how the world And so what we think will have a tremendous impact on how we feel and our state and what goes on. And if we're superglue is so tight, attached to our ideas, our concepts, our opinions, even if their true opinions, they're right good. The glue the way we're holding on to them tends to close us down tends to constrict tends to put a barrier between the openness of the heart The and then sometimes it's not super glue that keeps us to our thoughts. But maybe it's like elmers glue got become an expert on the elmers gloob raising children and you know elmers glue is has a good reason why they have that at home, you have kids because it cleans up you put water on it then you know it dissolves. So sometimes you know the thoughts in us are connected to elmers glue and so just the matter of Water in these kind of gives us so much work to kind of get it to dissolve and, and free our system the thoughts and then sometimes thoughts are hardly attached at all. And all it takes is a little bit of awareness and it dissolves the connection, the glue that keeps it there. And sometimes there's no glue at all. And it's really remarkable to watch a thought arise in the mind and see that and see that you are independent of the thought see that you are no way or defined by the thought involved in the thought it could be a brilliant thought it could be an awful thought. And you see that's a thought as opposed to being believing the thought getting involved in the thought being pushed around by the thought or getting caught up in associated thinking that kind of like a wave after wave follows and follows and follows like a chain like a train that follows you know, different wagons. They just have a single, you know, waivers Go wagon of a train go by just, you know, just let it be that by itself, it's quite a remarkable thing. And actually see the difference is, you know, that's just a thought and see the thought is there in a certain kind of way you are here. Who are you when you're not thinking? Who are you when you don't have thoughts that tell you who you are? Who are you when you don't tell yourself a thought about who you are? You're still here. And sometimes when you don't connect, you're when you're not limited by the thoughts when you're defining yourself by a thought. You're not involved in thinking you see thoughts are just thoughts and you're separate from the thoughts. But you're not telling yourself who you are. You're much closer to this place of being open, expansive. You're much closer I believe, to a place of heart and openness.

So I think that it's kind of natural, I believe, I hope It's natural enough that as we sent to meditate as we meditate, and we learn how to separate ourselves from our thinking, as we begin applying the water to the elmers glue, and this begins to kind of separate ourselves and quiet down are not caught up in that.

We're no longer focusing and trying to get what we want. We're not focusing on my suffering and my pain in some kind of contracted way. Not that not to deny pain and suffering, but we're not contracted by we're not. We're not super glued to it. And we have to separate and soften around it. That the dimensions of sensitivity dimensions of openness, dimensions of emotions that can flow so called positive emotions can flow from us begin to bubble up that are very hard, as I keep saying, when we're self preoccupied when we're caught up in desires and what we want, we were caught up in our regrets and what didn't happen or losses. We're caught up with any of these things as real as you know, worse than they might be. They caught up this limits the capacity of our hearts. So you know, so for example, I there's a fairly common exercise that people will ask is our pension is rather than focusing on what you want, focus on what you have, be grateful with what you have, rather than focus on what you don't have yet. And are there things to be grateful for his? Do you have things to be grateful for? And how often do you spend time reflecting on what you're grateful for? Before giving this talk, thinking about giving this talk, I dug up notes I had when I used to write my Dharma talks, and I had one talk written the night about gratitude title is gratitude and Think most interesting thing about the talk for me in his notes was that the date I put the date on when I wrote the talk, and the date was 1995. And so that's long ago. But what was interesting about that date for me is that it was before the advent of the real kind of strength, development of the field of psychology called positive psychology, which my understanding kind of really began taking off in around 2000. And since that time, and there's been a lot of studies on gratitude, and the value of gratitude. And, and what they researchers have discovering is that from the experiments they do, that the person who is grateful benefits from the gratitude. And so they had these exercises, they had these control groups and they have some people who do like every day For example, for 10 weeks or six weeks, write down five things they're grateful for. And then they have, you know, maybe a control group who doesn't do anything and never control the other group that writes down. Just five things that about the day they didn't work. And then they study the happiness level of these different groups. And the happiness level of the people who write down this gratitude reflections increases over time, but more interesting amount of more interesting but also they found that the people who do this gratitude reflections every day, they report fewer headaches, fewer, less pain, a variety of kind of physical symptoms decrease for the people who are expressing gratitude. Why is that? What is it about gratitude? So here we have the daily gratitude benefits the person who's grateful. So is it valuable to spend time Being grateful What are you grateful for? There's a for me very touching. I tend to recently have hope it wasn't a Sunday morning. very touching. story I read about Mr. Rogers. Mr. Rogers was probably the person one of the people who qualify this American saint. This piece of television personality and I loved this too. I didn't discover him until I had kids. I thought he was great. And apparently Mr. Rogers won an Academy Award or something like that Oscar on TV rights is one of those Oscar, Emmy I don't know. I'm grateful for not watching TV. And for not knowing. When you go got an Emmy, I guess and so apparently was on TV, it's big award and all these movies And people used to people were in the audience and Mr. Rogers comes up to get his award. And, and in his wonderful way, he said something like, you know, he's grateful. And really, this is a good time for everyone to be silent for a minute and reflect on. Everyone had someone to help them get where they are now in their life, someone who believed in them supported them, someone who they're grateful for. And let's spend a minute remembering those people in silence. And so apparently, the movie producers or TV producers on the show, like we're just like, frantic, what do I do? A minute, a minute of silence on public TV. So what do you do? Well, just to spend a minute focusing on Mr. Rogers minute is a long time on TV. And so the pan the audience and article that I wrote that that read that talks about this, so as they pan the audience, and everyone was sitting there doing his reflection People are crying. It's a beautiful thing. Mr. Rogers did it again. The and perhaps it's very hard to have Buddhist spirituality without some feeling of gratitude. Because there's a reciprocal relationship as we meditate and open up the whole more expansive. I think it's natural to have these things like joy and happiness, gratitude come, but also there's there's a script because mutual as we focus on being grateful, then it tends to open up the heart. So it's goes in both directions. And it might be hard to be joyful. It might be hard to

be happy. But I think it's relatively easy to be grateful because gratitude depends on a certain reflection, joy and happiness, I don't know, you know, take a little bit more effort perhaps to recognize it or to evoke it. But it's possible to do a gratitude journal as possible to write down reflections as possible to go to someone and express your appreciation of them. Their gratitude for them being in your life. And I know there was a time in my life where I clearly I thought this was silly. And, and little bit saccharin, like a little bit I didn't quite trust you know, this kind of go, you know, somebody told give me if I'd listened to this talk, someone gave this talk 30 years ago, I would have I didn't know what if I would have cringed so maybe hoping none of you are cringing. But But now I've come to really appreciate and love feelings of appreciation of gratitude. Certainly the effect it has on me but I also love the idea that of supporting and helping other people art. I know that's the right word, but expressing it letting other people feel the appreciation that we have for each other. Some people have protested that the things like emphasis on gratitude is not really appropriate in a world where there's so much suffering in the wake of people of loss and all kinds of things. And, and other people have said that this is actually a very important time for gratitude. And in fact, it's a fairly common movement for people to feel grateful when there's been great loss. Not everyone, of course, but it's a movement there. And there's a world of difference between being upset and angry or horrified or around the loss. Someone who's died who we love. versus or, or in addition to doing that, to spending time reflecting on being grateful that you knew that person, being grateful that person was in your life and to spend some time that reflection be grateful that person was in your life, I like into, you're not denying the grief not denying the loss and the problems, but it adds a different element to the ecology of the heart. It focuses on a particular aspect of the heart, which may be his capacity as there that's not meant to deny the what the situation is.

I liken it to, if you're in a sailboat, and you want to sail against the wind, you're foolish to sail direct, you can't sail the sailboat directly against the wind doesn't work that way. You have to kind of go to the side and catch the wind from the side you kind of have to tack back and forth. And so thinking about what we're grateful when we appreciate When the storms of life is maybe like, setting the sails just right, to catch the wind to be with a difficult situation in a way that helps us move forward, not to deny it. So it's possible to reflect and spend time thinking about gratitude. And I think I suspect most people, if they did an inventory of the top 25 things they think about during the week and they saw the list. Most people would probably agree that it's reasonable to stick in there in the top 25. A little bit of period of gratitude, thinking, thinking about what you're grateful appreciative of, but to do it consciously, because maybe you can't do it. If you just set the intention. You have to actually more than you have to do it intentionally or clearly. got to do it. But maybe, you know, I suspect that if you took a top 25 things you think about and drop number 25 down to 26. And, and at 25 you put gratitude. You know, I don't know how many times a week you think about that 25th talk, you know, tune. But that would have a dramatic and remarkable impact on your life. Because it's not just talking about like going around to all the time thinking about gratitude, but to bring it into your life salted into your life, sprinkle it in, I suspect will have dramatic effects. Gratitude has a very powerful effect. I believe. generosity, generosity is kind of like giving and generosity is kind of the cardinal virtue in Buddhism and the entry point to Buddhism. The Buddha emphasizes over and over again how important it is, but to give when you're grateful to give as expression of gratitude as part of gratitude. is a protection from the generosity being a way of getting something for yourself or being kind of a little bit aloof or looking down upon someone's I'm the one who's giving. And here, you're pourcel, I'm going to give you something, but to give in a field of gratitude, of appreciation, where I think it makes us more equal or makes us more sharing a world that's open and expansive. And this is, I think one of the really beautiful things is for human beings as a community to share with each other, the expansive qualities of the heart to the inner life, the open qualities of heart, as opposed to sharing the closed parts when we're angry and hateful and, and caught up in ourselves. And so I hope that something like mindfulness practice meditation practice, I hope that coming here at IMC is something that supports the opening of a heart If you want a jumpstart



in that process practice gratitude look at what you're grateful for. So as we come to the end of this talk what I like to do is you know for me personally and also for many people I MC community and the fact that this building is here this community is here and this we do a tremendous amount to serve so many people all with volunteers I don't know of any maybe there must be but i don't i don't know if organization like us where that does so much. And we have this huge retreat center and we touch people all over the world seems like every day we come I come here now someone has come here because they've been listening to talk so Nadia Dharma anybody here today because here because of that. Yeah, welcome. Well, yeah, you know, maybe cause dharma.

Anyway, so I wanted to express certainly my gratitude to all the volunteers, but maybe all of us can to each other. And I was wondering if all the people who have in the past and currently volunteer in some capacity, are there any capacity at all with a wide IMC kind of orbit that what we do here? Could you stand?

That's an amazing group. And Joe, you should stand you've helped. So many of you're shy to stand you're not you don't think but you don't account. Some of you. Anyway, thank you so much for those who volunteer for me and from everybody, and there's many, many thousands of people who benefit from what you've done one way or the other. Thank you.

So now, if you are willing, I was hoping you would form little groups of about four or five people. And or flee

Four or five people and spend, spend about maybe 10 minutes with your group, sharing something that comes from you, and about gratitude, it could be reflections and its value, it could be what you're grateful for. It could be almost anything that comes up for you. So I want to keep it quite open and spacious. That what you want to share on this topic of gratitude, and just go around the circle of your group of four or five, and each person can share something, and then we'll do about 10 minutes, then we'll come back and do a final closing. Before they the usual time to end thank thank you for that. It was nice to sit here and feel all the energy and look like good energy, good feelings, good discussion. good number of smiles. Nice topic. And so one of the wonderful practices is the practice of the sacred pause. And pause doesn't have to be any longer than snap of a finger. It can be as long as a Sabbath. But a sacred pause is a time to step back and step out of the usual curtain. pull apart to pull it pull aside the usual curtain of our thoughts preoccupations, the usual way which we're contracted or caught if we're busy and involved and preoccupied and whatever it might be. And take Deep breath or look around or take in as much more here. It's really a remarkable thing. To be a human, to be human being to be alive, when so much of what it requires for us to be alive and to live is given to us this is supported by other supported by, by nature by theirs we have a tremendous amount of support that keeps us going. It's, I've been impressed that it's the people who seem to live most self sufficiently in terms of living in nature and farming and, and requiring the seasons and the rain everything team to be the people who have the most gratitude and the people who do the least of least least for themselves, in terms of what they need in order to get by. And Timmy tend to feel less gratitude and then And industrial world were also busy and, and we're much more dependent on each other than many places in the world. So the sacred pause, to take in the miracle of being alive, the miracle of being aware, the sacred pause that allows us to take a moment to open the heart, open wide, and see what comes both out of our open heart and see what the open heart can take in from the world around us. I think it's a powerful thing. And if we could have more sacred pauses, we'd have a much better life. So thank you all very much. And I hope that as this holiday season, into the new years, that you will pause in a sacred way on a regular basis, and that as you get into the new year, that you leap into the new year, into a wonderful year of appreciation and gratitude. For the world we share. Thank you all.