

I suspect every single one of us grew up being told to say thank you. We were told it was the polite thing to do; it's what one does. It's what one is supposed to do. You say thank you when someone gives you something or when someone does something for us.

We were told we do this in order to be polite to someone else. The focus of the thank you, the purpose, was for the benefit of someone else. We were taught that the primary orientation of a thank you is the external.

We were not taught about an internal orientation of saying thank you. That part we figured out on our own. More accurately, it just came naturally to us. Can you remember as a kid saying, "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"? That form of thank you wasn't really about the external, that was an expression of joy, excitement and enthusiasm.

I fear, for the most part, many of us got short-changed. We were not taught to notice and pay attention to the internal feeling that comes with truly feeling thankful. We weren't taught to savor the calm, internal warmth of gratitude.

I say for most of us, because I can think of two examples where that may not be the case. I've read of Native Americans, perhaps others, who say a prayer, or words that express gratitude to the animal or plant that has given it's life in order to feed us. A few of us learned to be thankful in this way.

The second example, a larger percentage of you might be quite familiar with. Some of you were raised in a religious tradition that saw all things as a gift from God. You were taught the importance of not just saying thank you, but of internalizing a sense of gratitude and appreciation for what came to us from God.

I wonder how many of us recognized that same fundamental message in the words of the hymn we sang this morning. Do you remember some of the words to the hymn For All That Is Our Life? It's no accident that hymn is in our order of service this morning.

“For all that is our life, we sing our thanks and praise, for all life is a gift which we are called to use, to build the common good and make ***our own days glad.***” “For needs that others serve, for services we give, for work and its rewards, for hours of rest and love, ***we come with praise, and thanks...***”

These words are not about saying thank you. They’re not, fundamentally, about an external orientation. “We come with praise and thanks....” These words express a deep sense of gratitude and appreciation. These words express a feeling that rises up inside of us. This is an expression of the spirit.

In our reading this morning, Deepak Chopra, told us, “Experiencing gratitude is one of the most effective ways of getting in touch with your soul”. He says, “Gratitude is a fullness of heart that moves you from limitation and fear to expansion and love....You feel connected to everything in creation”.

If Deepak says it, it must be true! Maybe it’s because I’ve started to pay more attention, or maybe, in fact, it’s something that is fairly recent in our culture, but a focus on gratitude has taken on a life of it’s own.

Yoga and mindfulness practices focus on cultivating gratitude. Daily spiritual practices are built around paying conscious attention to what we are thankful for in our lives. Even science has studied the impact of gratitude on our physical and mental well being.

I think the world would be greatly benefited by many more of us choosing to take the time to slow down and focus our attention on being grateful. Cultivating an attitude of gratitude can’t help but benefit human kind, and the web of existence.

We live in a culture that is so very focused on ego gratification. We are so focused on external indicators of success, beauty, wealth and likeability. Everywhere on the web is a button you can click to “like” this or that. You get to be an active participant...in something!

They play on your ego need to be recognized and to have “your” opinion heard. But, in reality, who cares? What do they do after you’ve clicked??? Do you really think it changes anything?

The same holds for news oriented websites. You get to vote yes or no on whether congress should pass a particular bill. Or whether the courts made the right decision, guilty or not??? You decide! Click.

I was at the Vanderbilt the other day taking in the sites, smell and sounds of fall. Birds were flitting in the trees, eating seeds out of pinecones. The wind had leaves floating in the air. I saw rows of mountains with varying shapes and colors all lined up on the other side of the river.

And I saw people stop their cars for a quick look at the scenery before they turned their backs on it, and got out their phone to take a selfie. I continue to be amazed by how many people feel the need to share virtually every moment of their lives. I guess they put it on Face Book or something and ask people to “Like” them. I don’t know how it works...does the one with the most “likes” win????

A focus on cultivating gratitude seems a wonderful elixir to gratifying the ego’s need to be liked. In an article in Forbes, Amy Morin, a psychotherapist, sites seven scientifically proven benefits of gratitude. 1) Gratitude opens the door to more relationships... thanking a new acquaintance makes them more likely to seek an ongoing relationship.

2) Gratitude improves physical health... people experience fewer aches and pains...They exercise more often and are more likely to attend regular check-ups with their doctors. 3) Gratitude improves psychological health...reduces a multitude of toxic emotions, from envy and resentment to frustration and regret... increases happiness and reduces depression.

4) Gratitude enhances empathy and reduces aggression... people are more likely to behave in a pro-social manner...experience more sensitivity and empathy toward others... and a decreased desire to seek revenge. 5) Grateful people sleep better. Writing in a gratitude journal improves sleep...just 15 minutes jotting down a few grateful sentiments before bed...you may sleep better and longer.

6) Gratitude improves self-esteem... reduces social comparisons... people are able to appreciate other people's accomplishments. 7) Gratitude increases mental strength. Recognizing all you have to be thankful for – even during the worst times of your life – fosters resilience.

She concludes by telling us “Developing an ‘attitude of gratitude’ is one of the simplest ways to improve your satisfaction with life.

Through mindfulness, by bringing your attention to gratitude, you set the ego aside. You focus on the here and now of the experience of being grateful. With attention to gratitude you can experience a sense of fulfillment, of happiness. It can change your mood, not just for the moment but for days or months.

Cultivating a sense of gratitude promotes positive thinking. It increases your awareness and sense of abundance. One's focus is on what one has and has been given. It takes attention away from that heavy, dull, sense of “lack” that comes with a focus on what is missing in our lives.

A sustained awareness of gratitude opens our hearts, we appreciate others for how they benefit our sense of well-being. We become softer, more at ease. We appreciate the little things in life. By acknowledging our sense of gratitude we begin to see and to experience more and more gifts of the universe. Which in turn, increases our sense of gratitude.

Lets be clear, cultivating gratitude is not a fix all. It doesn't insulate us from the pain and disappointments of living life in human form. We still must face trials and tribulations. However, the attitude we've created, our orientation to life is such that it balances our disappointments.

With an orientation towards gratitude, we become more accepting of all of life. We recognize that our travails are not the totality of life. Even when we experience difficulties, we recognize them as but a part of a larger whole; a larger whole that includes those things for which we remain grateful.

Like anything else, cultivating mindfulness of gratitude takes practice. At first we may only see the “big” things, our family, a job that pays the bills, good health. With practice we begin to see that even disappointments may be a gift, that they may provide an opportunity to see ourselves in a different light.

As we cultivate a mindfulness of gratitude, we can recognize a bird’s song as a gift, or the rustle of leaves before a summer rain. Over time, we come to see, and more importantly, experience ourselves as part of an interconnected larger whole.

When we recognize ourselves as part of a larger whole, it becomes easier to defend another, or a fundamental principle. It becomes easier to give, to be generous, knowing that in giving we also receive.

With an increased sense of gratitude, comes a decreased need for things to be a certain way... the way we decide in our heads is right, good, or bad. An internalized sense of gratitude shifts us away from our sense of self being dependent on external circumstances. We increasingly find a sense of well-being residing inside ourselves.

Practice gratitude. Practice so that you learn to take gratitude, gratefulness, with you wherever go. I promise, you will be better equipped to enjoy the life you have been given.