

## Endless Appreciation – The Practice of Gratitude

*God gave you a gift of 86,400 seconds today. Have you used one to say "thank you?"*

*~ William A. Ward*

I believe that it was Michio Kushi who coined the phrase, "Endless Appreciation," and who encouraged his students and clients to allow it to penetrate their being and their way of living. It is a big challenge to set as a goal for oneself to be endlessly appreciative. Endless is ceaseless, never-ending, never-stopping; It means bringing gratitude to every part of one's day, hour, second, nanosecond, every moment of the day. When we are consumed with our daily work, school, chores, cooking, cleaning, and mowing the lawn, how can appreciation and gratitude possible be present in every moment of our live? When you add the hardships that life can bring, pain, sorrow, depression, illness and disease, it is clear that the "endless appreciation" is a lofty goal; nonetheless, it is a worthy aspiration. Simply striving for "endless appreciation" can change the way you encounter the world, but before we can really engage ourselves in striving towards such a lofty and ambitious goal we must understand gratitude better. We must understand gratitude inwardly from our own perspective. How does gratitude manifest within us? When do we say "thank you" to others? When don't we give thanks? What goes on inside of us when we choose to thank one another?

*As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them.*

*~John F. Kennedy*

When I was a small child it was ingrained in me to thank people for their kind deeds. The words "thank you" sort of spill out of me after someone offers me an ice cream on the boardwalk or held the door open for me at the mall. Saying "thank you" became an unconscious habit often said without giving the words much thought. If I thought about these words before I said them, or even afterwards, I would indeed find that I was truly grateful for the gift bestowed upon me, but unless

you take notice of these moments while they are happening, they are often long gone before we have the opportunity to really feel the magnitude of the gratitude experienced. "Thank you" becomes automatic. While deep inside you really do mean that you are grateful when you say these words they can be nonetheless empty words void of feeling in the moment of thanks. They are rehearse, and the gratitude you feel isn't the kind that reverberates throughout your body, the feeling that makes you heart feel like the Grinch's heart, growing and swelling until you feel a glow emanating upwards and outwards from your chest. This is the kind of feeling I experience when my thankfulness is imbued with feeling.

I remember the first moment in my life that I felt this kind of feeling. I was in second grade and just about to make my first holy communion at our catholic church. At the time we lived in the suburbs of Chicago and most of my relatives live in New Jersey. My grandma was on the phone with me. She and my grandfather worked all of their lives, but despite their hard work they did not have a lot of money. I knew this. They were always looking for the bargains at flea markets and produce stores. My grandpa would ride around on trash day and pick up things that he thought he could paint and reuse. When I was in college he found a set of chairs that he painted brown and gave to me. I still have these chairs in my house today. In my grandparents' house nothing would go to waste. Living through the Great Depression, they knew the value of things. Newspapers were reused to wash the windows and if old clothing couldn't be darned, it was taken apart to become something else. My grandma was thrifty and money went a long way.

While I was on the phone my grandma told me she was going to fly out to Chicago to attend my first holy communion. I didn't expect her to come that distance, all the way from New Jersey, and I knew what a huge financial sacrifice this was for her. She was going to do this for me. What a gift of love! Instantly joy welled in my heart, gratitude for her gift rose upward filling my whole being, and tears began to roll down my cheeks. I remember feeling embarrassed about the emotions brought on during that conversation as well as confusion. Tears had always come when I was sad, mad, or hurt. Why were tears pouring from my eyes

when I had none of these feelings? I believe it was the first time in my life I had experienced gratitude and the real joy that accompanies it.

I try to keep this image as a picture of real gratitude. Feeling gratitude rather than just saying you are thankful is not an easy thing. Some people are better than others at recognizing when they are thankful and acting upon their gratitude by writing a thank you note or making a special phone call. I try to conjure up this feeling of true gratitude from the past when I say, "thank you," or give thanks for my life experiences.

***Your body is precious. It is our vehicle for awakening.  
Treat it with care. ~ Buddha Quote***

Shortly after my diagnosis with breast cancer I decided to eat Macrobiotically. I knew that people used this diet to help recover their health, and I was eager to do all I could to use food to benefit my healing process. What I didn't know was that Macrobiotics was not only a diet, but also a way of life. Particular attention was given to the way you prepare the food, from how you cut the vegetables to how you changed the energy of a dish by the flame you used while cooking. As a macrobiotic cook seasoned her food to see if it was harmonious and complete, she would sit or kneel down to taste the food. It helped to bring attention to what was being tasted as well as a way of respecting the plants that gave their lives for our nourishment and livelihood. Attention is given not only to the food preparation practices, but also to the energy or mood of the cook. If a cook was anger, then the vibration energy of that anger was said to penetrate the food. If the cook was happy, then happiness vibrated through the food. It is better to have the food of a happy inexperienced cook, than one that fills your food with anger and resentment.

After being taught the care and attention that a macrobiotic cook takes in preparing a meal, I began to pay particular attention to my own feelings before I began to cook. I would light a candle and set an intention for the meal. As I would cut my vegetables, I would use it as a meditative practice in presence bringing all my attention to each slice of the knife. I also began to pay particular attention to my

grace before dinner. When I was with my family I tried to imbue the words of our grace with the feeling of gratitude that I felt with my grandmother years ago. Before I would begin to eat, before I would take my first bite, I would sit quietly, allowing the aroma of the dishes to fill me. As the scent of the dishes penetrated my nostrils, I would think about the plants, how they were grown. I would fill my being with gratitude for the sun, and the rain, and the moon that nurtured their growth. When I was alone or with a macrobiotic friend, we would hold hands and exchange our gratefulness for each other and the ability to cook our food. Our gratitude was expressed spontaneously from the words that rose out of our inner being at that particular moment. Each meal I try to bring forth the gratitude that filled my heart the day my grandma called me when I was in second grade.

*Grace isn't a little prayer you chant before receiving a meal.  
It's a way to live. ~ Jackie Windspear*

So what is true and real gratitude? What does it mean to feel endless appreciation for everything in life? Giving thanks is a way to reciprocate a feeling of love and appreciation for an gesture offered by another being – human, animal, plant, spirit – angel, God, etc. – or the manifestation of an action or condition created by another including one's own spirit. Wikipedia defines gratitude as feeling, emotion, or attitude in acknowledgment of a benefit that one has received or will receive.

Gratitude invokes a feeling, emotion, or attitude that comes from different sources within. It emanates from the soul. It comes from different corners of the soul, different aspects of our being. In an exploration of what others said about gratitude, I found a website that had many quotes on gratitude by famous people. What struck me most about the sight was not the quotes, but a picture at the top of the quotes. In the picture a man was standing on a ridge before a valley, in the distance were mountains. The entire photo was filled with the life of the earth – the green of the trees and plants seem to burst from the photo. In the midst of the greenery stood the man arms stretched wide and his face and chest lifted towards the heavens. The rays of sun reflected off his body as he absorbed the golden light

into his whole being through his heart. His posture was one of complete awe and gratitude. The picture seemed capture the man's expression of complete gratitude for the warmth of the sun, the beauty of the earth, and the strength and wonder of his body. When we experience gratitude there is a feeling that fills our heart with something so expansive that we have no choice, but to open up to the world. There is wonder and awe that cannot be contained by our physical body and it is forced to emanate outward into the world.

The more we are able to develop our sense of gratitude, the closer we move toward the realization of living each moment with full consciousness and filled with endless appreciation. In this season of harvest and thanksgiving, may the feeling of gratitude resonant within your hearts. May you recognize the grandeur of gratitude in both the significant and insignificant events in your life. May the feeling of gratitude well up in you and emanate outward into the world. May you strive to find endless appreciation and fill your hearts with gratitude every day, every hour, and every moment.