

A full-page photograph of two women performing yoga on a rocky, seaweed-covered shore. They are both in the Tree Pose (Vrikshasana), standing on one leg with the other bent and foot resting on the inner thigh. Their hands are pressed together in a prayer position (Anjali Mudra) above their heads. They are wearing white athletic wear. The background features a calm sea, a distant coastline, and a sky with soft, white clouds. The women's reflections are clearly visible in the shallow water pools among the rocks.

# *The grace of* gratitude



There's one thing that ancient yogis, Buddhist monks and spiritual teachers knew thousands of years ago: only through gratitude for the present moment can we know true joy. Here, EMMA PALMER investigates yogic teachings on how to cultivate daily appreciation for life's many blessings.

The greatest paradox of gratitude is how it makes its way into our lives when we feel lost, with little to be thankful for. These are the times when we feel there is little or no hope, and look outside of ourselves to hold on to some sense of purpose. Fortunately, the teachings of gratitude find us when we recognise we can no longer sustain a thought process based on our 'lack of'. Through our day-to-day experiences, life unapologetically shows us that the more we focus on lack, the more we seem to attract it.

### YOGA AND GRATITUDE

The word 'gratitude' comes from the Latin word *grātus*, meaning 'thankful'. The ancient teachings of yoga provide insight on how we can best live our lives in a constant state of gratitude. The Sanskrit word for gratitude is *krtajna*, which translates as 'awareness of what has been done'. When we plant the seeds of *krtajna*, the natural fruits they bear is *sukhasamaja*, which translates as 'abundance of happiness'.

Through a dedicated yoga practice, we naturally grow to shift our focus from what we don't have to what we do. This serves as one of the greatest teachings of loss, in that we tend to appreciate what we have once it has gone. But there is a way to harness the power of gratitude as a daily ritual and practise mindful appreciation daily.

### APPRECIATION, ABUNDANCE AND HAPPINESS

The classical text of the *Yoga Sutras of Patañjali*, written more than 2000 years ago, contains 196 sutras, or aphorisms, focusing on how we can fully experience and realise the individual soul while living the human experience. Bearing in mind the era in which this text was written, none of the Western challenges

we experience today existed at that time, yet Patañjali's teachings are as relevant to us today as they were then.

In sutra 2.42, Patañjali states that true happiness can only be achieved and experienced once we live from a state of gratitude and is translated as 'through gratitude/contentment, the highest joy or happiness is attained'. Similarly, in sutra 2.39, Patañjali states that the yogis wisely recognised that the source of true abundance and happiness does not come from grasping onto physical possessions, even if you are grateful for them.

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Abundance comes only when we recognise the blessings in our daily experiences, without the Western desire for always wanting more. If we're unable to slow down and appreciate the abundance of the gifts we already have, then how can we possibly expect ourselves to experience long-lasting happiness when we've attained 'more'?

B.K.S. Iyengar was a renowned yogi and yoga teacher who said, "By the observance of *aparigraha* [non-possessiveness], the yogi makes their life as simple as possible and trains their mind not to feel the loss or the lack of anything. Then, everything we really need will come by itself at the proper time."

This is reinforced in the teachings of the Catholic Benedictine Monk Brother David Steindl-Rast. He states that if we want to be truly happy, we have to be



grateful. He believes that gratefulness is the experience of the great fullness of life, by realising how abundant we truly are. Furthermore, he recognises that thanksgiving arises when the gratitude bowl of life is overflowing and the desire to share, give and contribute in service to life and humanity is overwhelming.

## STOP AND TAKE STOCK

One way to experience the teachings of gratitude is to pause and reflect on aspects within ourselves, and our lives, that we feel grateful for. Without the ability to pause, reflect, observe and have an awareness of what we can truly be grateful for, how can the seeds of gratitude germinate into their fullness?

As Westerners, we have perfected the art of experiencing lack and focusing on what we haven't got or haven't achieved, but how often do we stop to notice how this attitude breeds the very energy we are trying to avoid? Quite simply, lack breeds lack, and abundance breeds abundance. Rather than focusing on what we don't have, we learn to focus on what we do. And by that simple act of recognising where our abundance lies, we simply tune in to the slipstream of being open to receive more of what we are seeking.

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This new way of thinking requires consistent repetition, and it won't be long before we see the power of how this subtle shift in perception unveils a totally new world of living and being. As with all practices, this takes time and persistence over a significant period of time, until gratitude and appreciation becomes our more natural state.





## GRATITUDE AS SĀDHANĀ

Gratitude as a spiritual practice has long been performed by Buddhist monks, who start each day with a chant of gratitude for the many blessings they receive in their life. Native American elders begin each ceremony with prayers of gratitude to Mother Earth and all aspects of nature's wisdom that supports life.

In today's modern world, practising yoga is just as common as having breakfast. However, we don't always recognise how the teachings of our practice show their grace in moments off the mat and into the subtle layers of our being – a natural and organic part of developing and growing as a modern yogi.

We find gratitude makes its biggest impact in the moment-to-moment experiences of life. Gratitude may show itself when we wake up to a magnificent sunrise over an expansive field of fog in winter, or the new blossom on the trees at the beginning of spring. It may arise

## GRATITUDE IN MOTION

Each morning, surround yourself with spiritual material that reinforces areas of your life to be grateful for, such as your health, your career, those you love and those who love you, and the home you have woken up in.

Start your day by listing at least five things you are grateful for and see how you can see this manifest and flow into your day.

Start a gratitude journal. Gratitude journals are an effective way of creating a morning and/or evening ritual by writing down a list of areas of our life we are grateful for. At the end of your day, write down the blessings you received, the experiences that presented themselves to you that you can learn and grow from. Ask what you can celebrate today that you feel grateful for and consider which blessings you received.

Appreciate being in the moment so you have the space to appreciate the connection to all of life. When we connect to nature, for example, the image in front of us is received by the retina in the eye, sending electrical impulses to your brain and heart and in that moment, recognises we are connected to all beings. This action takes us out of our heads and into our hearts, where the seat of compassion truly resides.

Commit to 21 days of gratitude, and journal your day-to-day experiences.

If you find yourself thinking there's nothing to be grateful for, think about the gift of the life force that moves through your body every day, and the gift of life you have been given.

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when someone holds a door open for us, or when someone has acted out a loving gesture without being asked, particularly when not being asked. The truth is, gratitude is a practice; a practice of mindfully being present to our surroundings and the recognition of the blessings right in front of us. It doesn't have to be a 10-minute practice that bookends our day, but a living, mindful present emotion that gifts us beyond the moment of appreciation.

### LIVING GRATITUDE

It's one thing to know what it is to cultivate a practice of gratitude when all is well in our world, but what happens to the teachings of gratitude in the face of real life trauma? Does gratitude become a luxury that gets discarded in the face of truly horrific events? *The Journal of Positive Psychology* conducted a recent study on 522 Israeli adolescents living in a city who had just experienced a missile attack over a five-day period. Researchers examined how

## AS YOU SOW, SO SHALL YOU REAP

The seeds of gratitude grow many branches. Their roots firm in the fertile soil of appreciation that eventually blossom into the gifts of abundance, happiness, joy, contentment and appreciation for all the rich experiences of life. We can either live as Alphonse Karr says, by complaining the rose bush has thorns, or we can rejoice because the thorns have roses. Ultimately, how we live our lives is up to us, but when we cultivate an awareness of experiencing the true spirit of gratitude, we experience an abundance beyond imagination. Essentially, gratitude is the gift that keeps on giving.

gratitude supported their recovery from the post-traumatic stress symptoms caused by this event.

The study showed that those who adopted an appreciative outlook had a significant impact on how they recovered psychologically from this event. The researchers recognised the simple words 'thank you' were a form of cognitive appraisal, shining a more positive light on their perceptions and experiences. Results of the study showed that the attitude of thankfulness healed effects of traumatic experiences and potentially provided an opportunity to prevent the initial negative psychological effects. Furthermore, the results highlighted how gratitude leads to a greater level of resilience to life experiences in the future.

This study, among many others, shows that no matter how much we prepare ourselves, nothing immunises us against processing the psychological impact of trauma; however, adopting a practice of gratitude does support the ways in which we perceive and process such major life events.

As a Buddhist practice, prayers of gratitude are offered to the suffering they have been given with recital of the following prayer, "Grant that I might have enough suffering to awaken in the deepest possible compassion and wisdom." ■

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