

What if You Were Already in Heaven,
But Just Hadn't Noticed?

By Peter B. Williams

The thief left it behind
the moon
at my window.

-- Ryokan-San (1758 - 1831)

The author of the above haiku, Ryokan-San is a revered figure in Japan. He became a Zen priest at 18 and soon inherited the temple of his late teacher. Life as an abbot did not suit him and he left the temple to become a solitary practitioner, moving to a hut near his hometown on the flanks of Mt. Kugami. There he begged for his food and spent much of his time playing with the village children as a kind of divine fool. One day Ryokan returned to his hut to see that a thief had stole his meager belongings. This inspired his haiku, one of the most famous in Japanese literature.

Ryokan teaches that happiness depends primarily on our attitude. Life is full of conflict, difficulty and sorrow as well as happiness, love, and beauty. Reality is what we chose to pay attention to. If we focus only on problems, then life is pretty problematic. If, in spite of life's trials, we can notice the simple gifts that the universe is bestowing on us all day long--the moon in a window, a laugh from a sandbox, the emerald flash of a hummingbird in a spotless morning sky--it is much easier to stay resilient and joyful. This is not an effort to minimize the very significant sufferings of racism, poverty, social injustice, illness, violence, warfare, etc. If we care about others, we need to address these problems. And we can also cultivate noticing the many gifts that being alive has given us.

What if you were already in heaven, but you just hadn't stopped to notice? Life may already be giving you what you need to be happy. Sometimes this takes a reframe. Vipassana teacher Larry Rosenberg likes to tell a story about a student who came to him with a problem. She was unclear about her life direction and felt unsatisfied with her work life. She told him with heartfelt conviction, "I just want to serve people, really serve them." "Well, what do you do right now?" he asked her. "Oh, I'm a waitress," she said. She may have had some grand concept about helping people, and yet, here she was, in a simple way, already fulfilling her wish. Gratitude is the practice of focusing on the blessings, the thousands of ways we are being given to each and every day. When we are steeped in gratitude, even challenging lives can feel much more workable.

Grateful Even for Suffering

"I thank God for my handicaps for, through them, I have found myself,
my work, and my God."

--Helen Keller

The practice below will help you be grateful for the joys in life. And we can also

be grateful for the suffering. Of the six realms in Buddhist cosmology, the Buddha said that the human realm is the best one in which to be born. In the god realm there is too much pleasure to motivate one to practice dharma. In the hell realms there is too much suffering. Humans experience enough suffering and pleasure to be motivated to look beyond immediate experience for happiness. One can only be enlightened in the human realm, the Buddha taught. Thus, we can be truly grateful for all the difficulty life brings us. It forces us to look beyond things going right in our life for a more reliable happiness. Geshe Gyaltzen says, "Think of suffering as a miracle performed by the Buddhas to get you to practice."

We can also contemplate that suffering helps us practice for dying. We don't have to die all at once. We can learn to deal with pain and hardship and letting go now, while we have strength and mental clarity. Imagine how weak you will be in the dying process. This is a hard time to begin letting go. We can practice living fully now by letting go of all that we experience. We don't have to "let go," we only have to "let it go," watching everything arise and disappear of its own accord. In the grace of kind attention, everything self-liberates.

Gratitude Practice

Saying "thank you" is not just good manners. It is a profound spiritual practice that aligns us with who we most deeply are. As the Hausa people of Nigeria say, "Give thanks for a little and you will find a lot." Other traditions offer the same sentiment. The 13th century mystical Christian Meister Eckhart said, "If the only prayer you said in your whole life was, 'thank you,' that would suffice." From the Sufi world, Rumi said "Giving thanks for abundance is sweeter than the abundance itself," and the Lebanese American poet Kahlil Gibran said, "Wake at dawn with a winged heart and give thanks for another day of loving." Imagine starting every day with that lovely thought! And imagine actually putting it into practice!

Here is a recent example of the power of gratitude to lead to contentment. An elderly couple from Nova Scotia, Violet and Allen Large, recently won \$11.4 million in the Canadian lottery. An online article from CBC news explains what they did with their winnings (November 4, 2010):

The Larges said Wednesday that they haven't spent any of the money on themselves....The couple, who have been married for 36 years, gave some of their winnings to family members, but the lion's share was hand-delivered to charities and other organizations.

"Nothing," Violet Large told CBC News. "We haven't bought one thing. That's because there is nothing that we need."

Allen Large, a retired welder, said he and his wife are quite happy with what they've got. "You can't buy happiness," he said.

Violet, 78, is just getting over surgery and six chemotherapy treatments for cancer, but it hasn't changed her outlook on life.

"It could be worse because I'm not bedfast, and I haven't been sick to my stomach, so I'm very fortunate," she said... "She says, 'I may not be able to get up and dance, I may not be able get up and swing to the Highland fling,'" Allen Large said. "But she says, 'I'm quite happy and coming along every day, I'm feeling a little bit better, a little bit better everyday. I've never been down and out, so what more do you want?'" Violet Large added.

... "That money that we won was nothing," her tearful husband, Allen, told the Nova Scotia Chronicle Herald. "We have each other."

Imagine dealing with six rounds of chemotherapy and having this kind of attitude! The couple is simply grateful to have the gift of life and the blessings of love and this makes them content enough to give away all that money.

Below is a contemplation that can help you see life more like the Larges. Let's get real, our lives, no matter how complicated or filled with struggle, are extraordinary miracles, and this practice will help us be more aware of this. In contemplation, you sit quietly and direct your thoughts to a particular topic, in this case gratitude. When you get distracted, leave that train of thought and return to thinking of gratitude. It's good to check in with your breath periodically to ensure you are being present. In addition, don't get too fancy with your thoughts. Keep them simple. I suggest doing this for 10 - 20 minutes.

Start by noticing your breath. After a few minutes, begin thinking about the fact that you are alive. You didn't ask to be born, you didn't ask to live. One day—poof!—your candle just got lit. Life is the ultimate gift, the most precious possession there is. Given this, anything that happens in your life is part of the gift, both happiness and suffering. Remember some happiness in your life. As you feel it, you could say to yourself, "Wow, I am happy. Thank you (Buddha, God, Creator, Universe) for the gift of life." Remember some suffering or hardship in your life. As you feel it, you could say to yourself, "Wow, I am happy. Thank you (Buddha, God, Creator, Universe) for the gift of life."

Now bring your attention to your breath. It has been there your entire life, breathing itself without being asked, giving you the gift of life with every rise and fall of your belly. This breath has been taking care of you in the most reliable way. Thank your breath however it feels right to do so. Now feel your pulse at the wrist or jugular veins in your neck. There your heart is, beating away without your asking, having taken care of you your entire life. Nature is not just aspen leaves clattering in a breeze, but is a life force inside of you, pulsing through your organs and tissues. Thank your heart for the miraculous gift of life it gives you some 70 times a minute.

Keep going through your body to any place you can think of. There is your stomach, obediently digesting whatever food you feed it, caring for you with utmost skill. "Thank you for taking care of me. Thank you for the gift of nourishment." There is your liver purifying your blood. "Thank you for taking care of me. Thank you for the gift of health." Your intestines keep on processing your food, leaving only waste

behind. "Thank you for taking care of me. Thank you for getting rid of what cannot help me." Your fingernails and hair are growing away without your bidding. "Thank you for taking care of me. Thank you for the gift of grabbing things and warmth." Notice any sounds. Your ears are hearing automatically, as long as you are not distracted. "Thank you for taking care of me. Thank you for the gift of hearing." Open your eyes. They are seeing automatically, as long as you are not distracted. "Thank you for taking care of me. Thank you for the gift of this field of color to feast upon."

Turn your attention to any pain or discomfort you may feel in your body. The universe cares so much for you that it built pain into your nervous system. If you did not feel pain, you'd just rest your hand on a stove burner until the pungent smell of charred flesh reached your nose. "Dear pain, for so long I have struggled against you. Forgive me for not thanking you for taking care of me until now. Thank you for the gift of being able bodied."

Turn your attention to your brain. What a miracle that it can symbolize the world so accurately. The heart pumps blood, the brain pumps thoughts. How amazing! "I rely on you to make decisions all day long. Thanks for taking care of me. For being such a loyal servant. Thank you for the gift of thought."

Returning your attention to the food in your digestive system, contemplating all that went into it. Food is nothing other than sun, rain, earth and oxygen turned into plant or animal tissue. Your stomach is right now turning clouds and dirt and water into you. The thoughts you are thinking and the awareness of these words is just nature in another form. You are not some isolated island, but a filter of a vast web of interconnection that encompasses the entire natural and human world. "Thank you, universe, for taking care of me. Your gifts support me in every moment."

Think of all ways others have cared for you: You are here in this moment, by the love of your family and friends. Think of your parents, the tremendous effort they put in to care for you, changing your diapers, holding you when you needed comfort. They worried so much about you. They had to let go of you in so many ways. Even if they have never understood you, or did not meet important needs, they still devoted tremendous energy and attention your way. "Thank you, dear parents for all your care and attention. You gave me the gift of growing into an adult."

We are so not alone. The computer you are using was made by someone with great concentration and attention to detail. They were not thinking of you when they assembled it, but here it is benefiting you. What a miracle! Think of the house or building you are in. Thousands of hours of effort went into its construction. The builders were not thinking of you when they built it, but here it is keeping you warm and dry. Look outside at the streets and trees. There is the world benefiting you in countless ways. "Thank you, universe, for taking care of me. Your gifts support me in every moment."

Others have cared for you more directly. Has anyone listened to you today? Tried to understand you? Think of all the wise people in your life – relatives, teachers, friends. Their wisdom and counsel has steered you through the minefield of life. "Thank you for taking care of me. You gave me the invaluable gift of wisdom and

counsel.”

If it feels appropriate to you, end the meditation with contemplating the teachings of the Buddha. Contemplate whatever way they benefit you and remember that the Buddha sat down by himself 2500 years ago and discovered something so powerful that it has come to you and met you in your life exactly as you have needed. The teachings have been propagated by an unbroken lineage of practitioners, just like yourself, for 2500 years. They were passed down to my teachers and through me on to you. “Thank you, Buddha, for taking care of me. Your profound discovery benefits beings even now.”

End the meditation by returning to your breath in a non-conceptual way, just feeling the sensation of rise and fall or in and out.

Gratitude Practice Off the Cushion

Brother David Steindl-Rast is a Christian contemplative monk whose main religious practice is gratitude. He has a great website with many gratitude practices, essays, and tidbits. Go to <http://www.gratefulness.org>. Here is an excerpt from a three-part gratitude practice:

To be awake, aware, and alert are the beginning, middle, and end of gratitude...

Step One: Wake Up

To begin with, we never start to be grateful unless we wake up. Wake up to what? To surprise. As long as nothing surprises us, we walk through life in a daze. We need to practice waking up to surprise. I suggest using this simple question as a kind of alarm clock: "Isn't this surprising?" "Yes, indeed!" will be the correct answer, no matter when and where and under what circumstances you ask this question. After all, isn't it surprising that there is anything at all, rather than nothing? ... we may not at all like that surprise. "How can I be grateful for something like this?" we may howl in the midst of a sudden calamity. And why? Because we are not aware of the real gift in this given situation: opportunity.

Step Two: Be Aware of Opportunities

There is a simple question that helps me to practice the second step of gratitude: "What's my opportunity here?" You will find that most of the time, the opportunity that a given moment offers you is an opportunity to enjoy--to enjoy sounds, smells, tastes, texture, colors, and, with still deeper joy, friendliness, kindness, patience, faithfulness, honesty, and all those gifts that soften the soil of our heart like warm spring rain...But while awareness of opportunities inherent in life events and circumstances is the core of gratefulness, awareness alone is not enough. What good is it to be aware of an opportunity, unless we avail ourselves of it? How grateful we are shows itself by the alertness with which we respond to the opportunity.

Step Three: Respond Alertly

Once we are in practice for being awake to surprise and being aware of the opportunity at hand, we will spontaneously be alert in our response, especially when we are offered an opportunity to enjoy something. When a sudden rain shower is no longer just an inconvenience but a surprise gift, you will spontaneously rise to the opportunity for enjoyment...

The Review Process

It helps me to review my own practice of gratefulness by applying to these three basic steps the rule I learned as a boy for crossing an intersection: "Stop, look, go." Before going to bed, I glance back over the day and ask myself: Did I stop and allow myself to be surprised? Or did I trudge on in a daze? Was I too busy to wake up to surprise? And once I stopped, did I look for the opportunity of that moment? Or did I allow the circumstances to distract me from the gift within the gift? (This tends to happen when the gift's wrappings are not attractive.) And finally, was I alert enough to go after it, to avail myself fully of the opportunity offered to me?

Poetry, Humor

I end with a few more tidbits that to help one feel grateful. These are all from Brother David Steindl-Rast's website:

In all ten directions of the universe,
there is only one truth.
When we see clearly, the great teachings are the same.
What can ever be lost? What can be attained?
If we attain something, it was there from the beginning of time.
If we lose something, it is hiding somewhere near us.
Look: this ball in my pocket:
can you see how priceless it is?
--Ryokan, Japanese Zen poet

Humor sure helps lighten the load. A first-grade teacher gave her students the first half of a well-known proverb, and asked them to come up with the second half. Here are some winners:

The pen is mightier than the...
...pigs.

Two's company, three's...
the Musketeers.

Don't put off till tomorrow what...
...you put on to go to bed.

Better late than...
...pregnant.

Children should be seen...
...and not spanked or grounded.