

The Transformative Power of Spirituality in Cultivating Gratitude

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Abstract:

This article delves into the profound relationship between spirituality and gratitude, two timeless concepts that have profoundly influenced human existence, well-being, and societal structures. Taking definitions from renowned scholars, historical perspectives, practices of ancient civilizations, and insights from various religious traditions, the piece culminates in an in-depth exploration of gratitude within the teachings of the Brahma Kumaris. The article provides a comprehensive understanding of these concepts and highlights the transformative power of gratitude and spirituality combined, can raise the individual and societal consciousness.

Keywords: Spirituality, Gratitude, Religious Traditions, Brahma Kumari, Personal Growth, Well-being, Transformation

Introduction

Spirituality and gratitude are two critical elements that have shaped our beliefs and behaviors. These concepts have maintained relevance regardless of constantly changing and evolving personal and societal facets of human life. Spirituality is a personal and subjective aspect that encompasses a sense of connection to something higher than oneself. Spirituality involves self-reflection. On the other hand, gratitude is being grateful for all our blessings. It can be directed towards others who support us during our difficult times or contribute towards our growth and development. We can also be grateful to the challenges in life that help us to grow. People who practice gratitude derive many psychological and emotional benefits. It promotes overall feeling of happiness, stress reduction and improved relationships. It also helps develop a more positive and optimistic outlook of life. Both spirituality and gratitude are intimately interleaved with our culture, psychology and how we

relate to others. These concepts often overlap, as a sense of gratitude is an essential element of spirituality, and spiritual practices cultivate gratitude.

This article ventures into this intricate interplay between spirituality and gratitude. Drawing upon historical insights, diverse cultural practices, and the profound teachings of the Brahma Kumaris, we will embark on a journey that is both enlightening and aspiring. The intent of this exploration is to highlight the transformational potential that these ideas possess both for personal development and for the benefit of our global community.

Understanding Spirituality

Spirituality can be understood through multidimensional theoretical constructs. Woods and Ironson (1999) define spirituality in terms of the search for universal truth and as an activity enabling people to discover meaning and significance in the surrounding world. According to Joseph et al., (2017) it refers to a deeply personal and often transcendental connection to a higher power, universal principles, or the inherent interconnectedness of collective existence. It involves exploring and seeking meaning, purpose, and a sense of inner peace beyond the material world. Hart (1994) defined spirituality as a way in which an individual experiences his or her faith in everyday life and style “in which the individual refers to the final conditions of individual existence.” Boswell et al., (2006) defined spirituality as experiencing transcendence through inner peace, harmony, or connectedness to others. Transcendence can take place both within the person and outside the person. According to Heszen-Niejodek and Gruszyńska(2004) "Inner" transcendence is about self-realization, self-improvement, and personal development and “External” transcendence may be directed to a higher entity or energy; to another person, claimed to be of value, who’s good is more important than one’s own good; or to the universe.

Spirituality vs. Religion

More often spirituality and religiosity are treated interchangeably. According to Tovar-Murray (2011) religion is linked with specific rituals, institutional dependencies, and social relationships, whereas spirituality is more about the personal experience of what is unseen and recognized as greater than us. Thoresen (1998) is of the view that religion is perceived mainly as a social phenomenon, while spirituality is usually considered at the individual level and within a specific context.

Unravelling Gratitude

Gratitude is more than just a fleeting emotion. Historically, the term "gratitude" traces its roots to the Latin word "gratus", meaning "pleasing, welcome, agreeable", and the Proto-Indo-European origin, "gwere", which translates to "to praise, to celebrate; to be in contact with the Divine." According to Komase et al., (2021) this powerful emotion holds profound significance in enhancing overall well-being and mental health.

According to Wood et al., (2010), gratitude forms part of a broader life orientation towards recognizing and appreciating the positive aspects of existence. It can be directed towards external sources, whether animate or inanimate. At its core, gratitude shifts our focus from what we lack to the riches we already possess. Dickens(2017) sees gratitude as a perspective cultivates positivity and resilience, allowing individuals to gracefully navigate life's challenges. This sentiment isn't just introspective. In relationships, the act of expressing gratitude fortifies bonds, fostering deeper connections and a perpetuating cycle of kindness. Wood et al., (2008) opines, gratitude amplifies positive emotions and boosts emotional intelligence, setting off a virtuous cycle of heightened positivity.

The Interlinking of Gratitude and Spirituality

But where does spirituality fit in this discourse? The ties between gratitude and spirituality are intricate. As we delve deeper into spirituality, understanding our existence and purpose, gratitude often emerges as the innate emotional response. This intertwined relationship, where one concept amplifies the other, sets off a harmonious cycle that uplifts human consciousness and enriches life quality. Both gratitude and spirituality, in essence, elevate human experiences by making us more attuned to life's blessings and lessons.

The universality of gratitude across ancient cultures and religions underscores its transformative power. Far from being just an emotion, gratitude was, and remains, a proactive path to spiritual enlightenment, inner peace, and holistic well-being. As we reflect upon these ancient practices, we're reminded of the timeless nature of gratitude, encouraging us to imbue our lives with thankfulness and deepen our spiritual journeys.

Gratitude in Ancient Civilizations: The Spiritual Thread of Thankfulness

Throughout the annals of human history, gratitude has held a revered position in the spiritual practices of ancient civilizations. Rituals, ceremonies, and daily life revolved around the expression of appreciation for life's many blessings. In recognizing and embracing these gifts, early societies forged harmonious relationships with nature, higher powers, and each other. This relationship was not merely a fleeting acknowledgment but a profound bond that strengthened their spiritual connection to the universe.

Every civilization, in its unique way, recognized the power of gratitude. Their practices reflected an understanding that the act of giving thanks had implications far beyond the immediate moment, connecting them to the divine and nurturing harmony with their surroundings.

Ancient Civilizations and their Spiritual Gratitude

Ancient Egypt: Gratitude was seamlessly woven into the Egyptian way of life. Prayers, offerings, and rituals were expressions of appreciation for blessings from the divine realm. Food, drink, and other gifts symbolized the acknowledgment of and desire to reciprocate divine benevolence.

Ancient Greece and Rome: The civilizations of Greece and Rome regularly expressed their gratitude through public festivals, sacrifices, and offerings, ensuring that gods and goddesses were thanked for their benevolence, be it in victories or bountiful harvests.

Ancient India: The Vedas and Upanishads, foundational scriptures of India, illuminated the importance of "yajna" or sacrificial offerings. Gratitude was manifest in festivals like Pongal, where the Sun God and nature were thanked for their gifts.

Ancient China: Chinese traditions honoured both Heaven (Tian) and Earth through gratitude rituals. The Mid-Autumn Festival, with its offerings of moon cakes under a full moon, symbolized thankfulness for unity and harmony.

Indigenous People: From the Americas to Oceania, indigenous cultures demonstrated their gratitude through ceremonies celebrating the interconnectedness of life. Native American

ceremonies, for example, gave thanks for the gifts of nature, emphasizing the symbiotic relationship between humanity and the Earth.

Religious Traditions and the Emphasis on Gratitude

Hinduism: Gratitude was at the core of dharma, or righteous living. The practice of "Dāna," selfless giving, exemplified how gratitude and giving were intertwined in early spiritual teachings.

Buddhism: In Buddhism, gratitude was seen as a bridge to harmony, both for the individual and the broader community. Reflecting upon and acknowledging the contributions of others was integral to reducing suffering and promoting peace.

Early Christian Teachings: Christianity highlighted the act of gratitude as a reflection of faith and dependence on divine will. Psalms brimmed with expressions of thanks, reaffirming the steadfast bond between humanity and the divine.

Sufi Mysticism: Sufi teachings within Islam identified gratitude as a means to transcend the mundane, drawing closer to God. It acted as a catalyst to foster love, humility, and spiritual enlightenment.

Gratitude in Brahma Kumaris Knowledge: An In-Depth Exploration

The Brahma Kumaris, a worldwide spiritual movement that originated in India, places a strong emphasis on self-realization and re-establishing a direct connection with the supreme source of universal energy, often referred to as the Supreme Father.

In the teachings of the Brahma Kumaris, gratitude is not just a fleeting feeling in response to life's ups and downs. It is regarded as a profound spiritual practice deeply woven into the fabric of personal development and spiritual awakening. Let's explore further how gratitude is perceived and nurtured within the Brahma Kumaris' philosophy:

A Fresh Perspective on Gratitude : We are familiar with the concept of gratitude as one of the fundamental virtues, typically understood as the act of expressing thanks to those or things that have aided or enriched our lives. However, within the philosophy of Brahma Kumaris, gratitude takes on a more profound dimension. It becomes an unconditional

emotion stemming from the recognition of divine blessings and connections. This form of gratitude is a continuous, unwavering sentiment (sadaa), independent of external circumstances and extended to all individuals (sarv ke prati), regardless of their actions. In essence, it's not contingent on the external world but rather a conscious inner attitude.

This shift in perspective can lead to contentment, ultimately resulting in happiness. With this understanding of gratitude, decisions are no longer driven by fear, desperation, or the need to prove oneself or accumulate possessions. Instead, they gravitate towards making meaningful contributions to life and appreciating its essence. The most profound benefit of nurturing such a grateful outlook is the shift from constant seeking to becoming individuals naturally inclined to give back and contribute positively to the world, fostering selflessness and a sense of service (sewa).

Embracing All Life's Scenes: According to the teachings of Brahma Kumaris, genuine gratitude encompasses the wholehearted acceptance of all aspects of life, including the challenges it presents. It is through these adversities that one's inner strengths, such as the ability to adapt, to endure, to let go, to move forward, and to confront, become apparent and truly shine. Most importantly, recognizing that every scene in life (drama) is purposeful, accurate, and flawless eliminates the need to question even the most arduous and demanding moments in life. This unwavering acceptance represents the purest form of gratitude toward life and the Divine power.

The Holistic Nature of Gratitude: Brahma Kumaris emphasize an all-encompassing form of gratitude. Whether it's for time, relationships, or material comforts, this holistic gratitude fosters universal acceptance and an unmatched sense of contentment.

Gratitude towards Time (Samay): Time occupies a profoundly significant place in the lives of all individuals. The way we interact with and perceive time shapes the trajectory of our existence. Those who consistently live with the mindset of lacking sufficient time, articulating this belief, and embracing it, end up fostering a conflicting relationship with time. In the philosophy of Brahma Kumaris, a distinctive perspective is presented, emphasizing the cultivation of a harmonious relationship with time. In this approach, one is encouraged to believe in the abundance of time to successfully accomplish all tasks. By

showing reverence and gratitude towards time, it, in turn, provides invaluable support to the individual.

Unconditional gratitude in Relationships (Sambandh - Sampark) : In contemporary times, relationships are growing increasingly intricate and convoluted. Interpersonal behaviors often revolve around perpetual seeking, leading to bitterness in these relationships. In the philosophy of Brahma Kumaris, it is advocated that one should always maintain a sense of gratitude toward all individuals because they enter our lives for a purpose. Embracing the belief that everyone in our surroundings can be regarded as beneficent figures due to their actions, which contribute to our journey towards wholeness (Sampoorn), is of paramount importance. In the confluence age (Sangam Yug), various events and interactions serve as triggers, which should be viewed as opportunities to resolve any outstanding karmic debts. Expressing gratitude, by simply "saying thank you" to all aspects of life, can facilitate the swift and smooth resolution of these karmic accounts. This unconditional expression of thanks not only enhances our relationships but also fosters harmony in our lives.

Gratitude towards objects or material comforts (Saadhan) : As one expresses gratitude towards all the tools or material comforts (Saadhan) employed, knowledge becomes clearer. This expression of gratitude fosters a relationship of acceptance and respect with everything, regardless of its size or significance. Gratitude nurtures acceptance, and with acceptance, the realm of possibilities expands, making tasks and endeavours more achievable and effortless.

Gratitude towards Nature (Prakriti): In Brahma Kumaris teachings, nature (prakriti) is considered very important. One should treat nature as one would want to be treated—with kindness and consideration. There is a close relationship between nature and human body because both are composed of the same five elements i.e., air, water, earth, space, and fire. By being grateful to all the five elements of the nature one can have balance of these five elements within the body and can have a stronger bond with nature.

Cultivation Through Meditation: Meditation holds a central role in the teachings of Brahma Kumaris, and the practice of gratitude is frequently integrated into meditation. During meditation sessions, individuals establish a connection with the Divine (Supreme Power) and convey their gratitude for the blessings and virtues bestowed upon them by the

Almighty. Additionally, they extend their gratitude and share blessings (sakash) with nature, time, fellow individuals, and material comforts.

Everyday Gratitude practises: In the Brahma Kumaris' daily routine, the day commences with expressing gratitude to the Supreme Father for the gift of another day to engage in the four fundamental aspects: Gyan (knowledge), Yog (spiritual union), Dharna (virtue), and Sewa (service). Yog involves the heartfelt remembrance of God, filled with profound gratitude and love, recognizing that God showers unconditional love upon all beings and everything at a universal level.

The act of offering daily food (bhog) is a way to convey gratitude to the Supreme God Father for making sustenance available to everyone. It also involves thanking every soul involved in the food's journey, from nature to farmers, retailers, and those who prepare it.

At every hour, a one-minute practice of “traffic control” is observed, allowing individuals to express gratitude to the Supreme Father and reflect on the past hour's activities. Throughout the day, all tasks are performed with mindfulness and remembrance, which is a form of gratitude, thereby transforming each action into Karma Yog (selfless service through action).

The day concludes with writing a letter to the Supreme God Father, facilitating the surrender of everything that occurred during the day, whether good or challenging, to the Divine. This practice empties the mind, making it easier to enter a peaceful, meditative state, and sets the stage for a fresh and rejuvenated start the following morning.

Overall impact of gratitude: Gratitude, as taught by the Brahma Kumaris, is more than a positive emotion; it's a life philosophy with profound effects on overall well-being. Practiced sincerely, gratitude positively impacts physical, mental, and emotional health. Physically, it improves sleep, reduces stress, and boosts immunity. Mentally, it lowers symptoms of depression and anxiety, enhances self-esteem, and builds emotional resilience. Emotionally, it fosters contentment and inner peace by shifting focus from lack to abundance.

Gratitude strengthens relationships, creating a supportive social environment. It enhances resilience, helping individuals reframe challenges as growth opportunities. Spiritually, it deepens the connection with the Divine, fostering purpose and fulfillment. A positive outlook emerges, leading to optimism and hope. In essence, gratitude is a holistic approach

to well-being, touching every facet of life and enabling a more fulfilling and content existence.

Conclusion:

In the intricate tapestry of life, spirituality and gratitude are interwoven threads that elevate human experience and consciousness. Spirituality, a deeply personal pursuit, seeks to explore meaning, purpose, and interconnectedness beyond the material realm. It is differentiated from religiosity, which often has defined rituals and institutions. Gratitude, rooted in historical and linguistic connections to the divine, serves as a positive life orientation. It's more than just an emotion; it's a lens that shifts focus from what we lack to the countless blessings we already have. This sentiment, fortifies interpersonal bonds, amplifies positive emotions, and creates a virtuous cycle of positivity.

The intricate relationship between gratitude and spirituality underscores that as we deepen our spiritual understanding, gratitude naturally emerges as a poignant emotional response. Tracing back to ancient civilizations, gratitude held an esteemed place in rituals, ceremonies, and daily practices, marking its significance in fostering a profound spiritual connection with the universe. Be it in Ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, India, China, or among Indigenous Peoples, the universal practice of giving thanks was seen as a vital pathway to align with the divine and nurture harmony.

Religious traditions, from Hinduism and Buddhism to Christianity and Sufi Mysticism, further emphasize the importance of gratitude. However, it's within the Brahma Kumaris knowledge that gratitude finds a profound and transformative depth. The Brahma Kumaris, originating from India, elucidate gratitude as more than just a fleeting emotion; it's a spiritual practice central to personal growth and awakening. This gratitude recognizes the divine in all, promotes an attitude of perpetual thankfulness, and is seen as both an outcome and means to spiritual elevation. Meditation, humility, and the emphasis on 'giving' are cornerstones of this gratitude-driven spiritual journey.

In essence, the Brahma Kumaris present a perspective where gratitude is an ever-radiating force, independent of external situations. It is about embracing every facet of life, cherishing the present, and recognizing the divine interplay in our experiences.

The teachings illuminate that when gratitude is deeply understood and genuinely practiced, it transforms not just the individual, but ripples out to impact broader society. Through the intertwined dance of spirituality and gratitude, we find pathways to enduring peace, inner contentment, and profound spiritual growth.

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