

COMMENTARY

Opening the Heart: A Spirituality of Gratitude

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Insights from the world's spiritual traditions can offer important perspectives on findings by Mills and colleagues (2015) that gratitude and spiritual well-being are related to positive health outcomes among heart failure patients. Fundamentally, gratitude can begin with the simple recognition that life is a gift. Cultivating such an attitude opens a doorway to the spiritual heart, the human capacity for subtle perception, communion, healing, and love.

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In their study on heart failure patients, Mills and colleagues (2015) found that spiritual well-being and gratitude were related to positive mental and physical health outcomes, with gratitude mediating the relationship between spiritual well-being and improved health. These findings raise interesting and important questions: what is the nature of this relationship between gratitude and spiritual well-being? And why might they contribute to health in such powerful ways?

The world's spiritual traditions might offer insights to such questions. First of all, gratitude is fundamentally a way of seeing that alters our gaze. Like Zen Buddhism's "beginner's mind" (Suzuki, 2010), gratitude begins with a simple recognition that nothing at all can be taken for granted. And if that is so, this life that we have, in all of its ephemeral particularities, is a precious gift. To recognize this gift is the beginning of gratitude.

Moreover, it is an attitude that can be consciously cultivated. For that reason, St. Paul urges his readers to "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thessalonians 5:18, in Metzger & Murphy, 1991), because indeed gratitude depends on inner intention and not on outer cir-

cumstance. Gratitude immediately shifts one's attention away from the negative, away from the seemingly ordinary, and into the new, the good, and the beautiful.

Within the Buddhist tradition, a simple yet profound practice calls to mind a benefactor, a person whom one can recognize, at least in some moments, wants for the person deep happiness and well-being (Makransky, 2007). By visualizing and receiving loving wishes from the benefactor, one cannot help but enter a state of gratitude, for the benefactor and for these moments.

In this way, too, gratitude opens up the door of the heart. Interestingly, Mills and colleagues studied patients who suffered specifically from heart failure. Although inclusive of the body and its emotional and mental states, the heart according to spiritual traditions refers not merely to a biological organ nor an emotional center. In Indo-Tibetan literature, the heart *chakra*, or energy center, has been described as "the seat of the soul, a place of compassion and love, an embodied awareness of the Infinite—the very core of being" (Denton, 2005, p. 758). Similarly, when Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21, in Metzger & Murphy, 1991), he was referring primarily to a capacity for spiritual perception. Episcopal priest Cynthia Bourgeault elaborates: "The heart can pick up subtle signals from all levels of reality . . . far beyond just the rational. The heart picks up from the emotions, from our sense of proportion, from intuition,

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from images and . . . keeps us aligned . . . with what we truly know” (Bourgeault, 2008, p. 36). Thus, the spiritual heart transcends but also includes the physical heart.

The spiritual heart is a meeting place, and not just where the body, the will, the emotions, and the intellect of the individual come together. It is a realm where we commune with others, because when we connect to our spiritual heart we connect to that realm in others as well. As Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast articulates: “the heart stands for that core of being where, long before alienation, primordial togetherness held sway” (Steindl-Rast, 1984, p. 29). The opening of the heart dissipates the all-too-prevalent sense of disconnection and alienation.

The spiritual heart can initiate deep healing. When we are able to bring loving attention to the tensions and the knots that build up in our body without instinctively turning away, healing can occur. When we are able to face and include in our awareness sorrows and emotional heartaches accumulated over a lifetime, emotional healing takes place. The capacity of the spiritual heart to perceive holistically and embrace multiple levels of experience gives rise to the capacity for previously unacknowledged and painful experiences to be included, felt, and healed. The Theravada Buddhist meditation teacher Jack Kornfield reports that nearly half of his students come to retreats dealing with some level of grief (Kornfield, 2009). Healing inevitably accompanies the opening of the heart.

Ultimately, the spiritual heart is a place of love, not in a romantic sense and certainly not in any sentimental sense but rather a love for all beings. It is a love like the sun that shines unconditionally upon all forms of life. It recognizes, as Franciscan priest Richard Rohr succinctly articulates, that “everything belongs” (Rohr, 1999). Like gratitude, this spiritual love involves a particular way of seeing, which requires cultivation and work. It understands moments that one does not love and withholds, at some level, wishes for others’ well-being as an

inability to see into the primordial depth of others, beyond reductive labels.

The 14th-century German theologian Meister Eckhart once declared: “If the only prayer you say in your life is ‘thank you,’ that should suffice” (Eckhart & Parke, 2010, p. 35). Starting from the recognition of what we are given, gratitude powerfully opens the door to the spiritual heart, a capacity for new perception and a realm where radical connection, deep healing, and unconditional love take place.

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