

Acceptance Through Gratefulness by S David Nathanson

I have experienced a few Saint Paul Damascus-like epiphanies and one of them happened when I serendipitously met Brother David Steindl-Rast, an Austrian Benedictine Friar, thirty years ago. Mere chance led me to see an information placard outside Old Saint Mary's Church on California street in San Francisco just twenty minutes before he gave a lecture entitled 'Christianity and Buddhism.' Intrigued at the seeming incongruity of the subject, and just in time for the unexpected experience, I deliberately changed my morning plans and made my way to the church basement auditorium to listen.

Wearing a simple, clean, white, turtleneck cotton shirt, a simple black sleeveless waistcoat, khaki long pants, comfortable brown leather sandals, a mischievous twinkle in his eye, bushy eyebrows dominating his face, a warm smile expanding into the gentle stubble of a trimmed beard, Brother David walked to the podium. The pious monk greeted the audience and started his talk with two fateful sentences that inspired me to seek more of his wisdom:

'Christianity is the tradition of the Word and Buddhism is the tradition of silence. Without silence one cannot hear the Word.'

I was impressed by the depth of that simple opening, and during the rest of the lecture I periodically held my breath, marveling at his wisdom and depth. He had a saintly aura, and I felt compelled to identify how such an elderly man could be so alert, alive, joyful, curious, informed, and full of wonder. For the ensuing twenty-three years I spent a week with Brother David every July at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur. He retired to a monastery near Salzburg where he recently celebrated his hundredth birthday, three months after publishing another of his more than twenty books.

What did I learn from him that has helped me to accept life in whatever way it presents, good or bad? He does not preach, has no hidden agenda, and has no need to prove that his ideas are better than others. He just exudes love for all the beautiful creatures created by a higher power and deserving of love.

My epiphany occurred during my first Brother David workshop on the living bible. At the end of the first evening session we stood in a circle holding hands while Brother

David expressed his gratefulness to the people that helped his successful stay at the Institute; the airline pilots, the airport security agents, taxi drivers, the gardeners that grew our food, the farmers who provided the coffee beans, his fellow Salzburg monks that took over his usual daily chores, even the sealions on the rocks below whose barking woke us at night. I walked with him in the hills during breaks, and ate meals in the communal dining room, where he talked gently about 'Gratefulness,' and it slowly dawned on me that this was different from being grateful only after being in a happy place. It was a conscious, deliberate, intentional decision to be grateful for everything, no matter what the circumstances. I came to understand that the intentional expression of gratefulness is the key to joy, and the pathway to happiness. By starting every day with gratefulness I am able to suspend personally derogatory judgment of another person. As soon as I practiced gratefulness I found a new way of being courageous, adventurous, understanding, and more loving. I believe that the positive feelings generated by gratefulness are likely to permeate love and contentment in my environment, and that such feelings are sensed by people I encounter, who are likely to respond in kind.

Over time, I have learned the importance of cultivating gratefulness for every experience I encounter, whether they are moments of joy or times of challenge. Each experience, good or bad, plays a significant role in shaping my being. By embracing gratefulness every day I can see how every event has contributed to my personal growth and development.

One of the most valuable lessons I have gained from embracing gratefulness is the acceptance that many circumstances in life are beyond my control. Instead of resisting or fighting these uncontrollable situations, I have learned the power of acceptance and gratefulness. This approach allows me to conserve my energy and maintain my sense of peace, rather than becoming overwhelmed by frustration or disappointment.

With gratefulness came clarity. By understanding more clearly the reality of daily events I am more able to triage and choose where to focus my energy. By directing my attention to what I can influence, I feel empowered and motivated to take positive action. This mindset enables me to navigate life more effectively, fostering a sense of agency and purpose.

Rather than fearing the unexpected, I have expanded my curiosity and openness. Surprises and unforeseen events are inevitable, but I now view them as opportunities to gain experience and grow. This shift in attitude helps me approach new experiences with excitement rather than anxiety, expanding my capacity for resilience and adaptability.

Consciously searching for the positive aspects or lessons within negative situations has become an integral part of my journey. Even in challenging times, I strive to identify what I can gain from the experience—whether it is a new skill, a deeper understanding, or greater empathy. Every day I consciously and mindfully feel grateful for what I have accomplished and how I live my life. This practice not only helps me maintain optimism but also strengthens my ability to transform challenges into valuable growth opportunities.

By appreciating all of my experiences, accepting what I cannot control, focusing on my sphere of influence, and embracing each moment with gratefulness and curiosity, I am able to continually learn, evolve, and accept. Every circumstance, whether pleasant or painful, has the potential to offer wisdom and contribute to my ongoing personal happiness.

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