

# gratitude IS GOOD FOR YOU

Lauren Tober talks about the benefits  
she gains from practicing gratitude





I stumbled across the concept of gratitude completely by accident. Reading about blogger Brene Brown's weekly gratitude practice intrigued me, and catapulted me head first into the world of gratitude. I began by simply noticing and acknowledging the things in my life I was grateful for, then experimented in introducing a simple gratitude meditation into my yoga classes. The effects on my own happiness were profound, and my students reported the same.

### The research

When I looked into the scientific literature on gratitude, the results were overwhelmingly positive. Robert Emmons and colleagues from the University of California have been studying gratitude for the past decade, and have found all number of life-enhancing side effects. For the most part, they asked their subjects, of which there were over 1000, to keep a simple daily gratitude journal, usually for around three weeks.

The effects of this gratitude practice spanned physical, psychological and social domains. They reported higher levels of positive emotion, more joy, pleasure, optimism and happiness, and they felt more alert, alive and awake. They felt more outgoing, forgiving, helpful, generous, and compassionate; as well as less lonely and isolated. On a physical level, they had stronger immune systems; they slept longer, felt more refreshed after waking, had lower blood pressure and were less bothered by aches and pains. Not bad for a small shift in focus.

### Gratitude in pictures

Impressed, I decided to develop a more formal gratitude practice, and embarked on a gratitude project of my own design. I'm a visual person with a love of photography, so I started regularly taking photos of things I was

grateful for. I began with the big things (my family, the beach, a lovely meal, a beautiful house), and found that with time the subtleties began to emerge. The feel of the sun on my skin, the sand between my toes, the moon in the afternoon sky, holding hands, being loved, the lineage of teachers who had passed down their knowledge of yoga to me, a car full of petrol, breathing, fingers and toes. The list went on.

One day I realised that gratitude photography was a part of my off-the-mat yoga practice, as I found myself becoming more aware, appreciative and connected – all things that yoga develops in us. And it went from being an intellectual exercise to very much a felt experience: one that brought me from my head to my heart. It became a meditation on the present moment and I began to embody gratitude in my every day. The writer Johannes Gaertner expresses this beautifully: "To speak gratitude is courteous and pleasant, to enact gratitude is generous and noble, but to live gratitude is to touch heaven."

### Tantra, yantra, gratitude, and the divine

Wanting to share this beautiful practice with the world, I developed Capturing Gratitude, an online space to share gratitude photographs and connect with others. Byron Bay yoga teacher Rachel Zinman was one of the first to sign up. Rachel told me that she started incorporating gratitude into her daily practice after being diagnosed with pre-diabetes around five years ago. She was burnt out, fatigued, and her immune system had shut down. "To be honest," she said, "I was quite devastated that I had gotten ill in spite of my practice." After one of Rachel's teachers encouraged her to focus on what was working in her life, rather than what wasn't, Rachel started to introduce gratitude into her life by creating simple altars. She started

with a single flower and a photo of someone she loved, and this grew over time to more complex yantras (sacred geometrical representations of deities) created out of hundreds of flowers. “I practiced fervently, losing myself in the flowers, the fragrance and the feelings that arose from just being able to make something beautiful in spite of what was going on physically,” she said. And when Rachel joined us in capturing gratitude, she found she was really the most grateful for simple, everyday things, like flowers, beauty, and the sky. She found herself “feeling so blessed to even have the ability to be grateful.”

Rachel follows the path of Tantra, and finds its core philosophy, that everything is divine, is the doorway into gratitude. “If everything around me, including me, is inseparably part of the whole then what is there not to be grateful for?” she says. “Everything in the creation is sustaining me. Our bodies are made up of the elements; we are sustained by food; we have sense

increased, both directly and indirectly. Directly because having a positive impact on someone else’s life makes us feel good; indirectly by accruing good karma. “When I reflect on the blessings in my own life, I cannot help but be filled with gratitude and sincere appreciation for all I have,” Katie adds.

Katie has both a formal and informal gratitude practice. Her formal practice was given to her by her American teacher Sharon Gannon. She sits in meditation and, after silently becoming aware of her breath, on each inhale she says silently to herself ‘blessings to .....’ and on each exhalation, she names a person she is grateful for. Katie includes family members, teachers, friends, work colleagues, and even people she does not know, including political figures who have influenced her life. Informally, Katie makes a habit of counting her blessings. On days when she’s finding her young children exhausting, she

cold, and I had to stay home. While I was disappointed, I still had the opportunity to flex my own gratitude superpowers. I felt grateful for the other workshops at the festival I had attended, and immensely grateful that my children were otherwise happy and healthy.

Happily, I met Rochelle after the festival, and she shared with me her first introduction into gratitude. While studying a course on the Divine Feminine in New York City, Rochelle was given an assignment to write down 100 things she was grateful for. Before she had the chance to begin, Rochelle’s mother called to say that her grandmother did not have long to live. Rochelle was on a plane two hours later, and not long after curled up next to her sleeping grandmother in her hospital bed. Rochelle spent the next few hours thanking her grandmother for everything she had done in her life. For making cinnamon and sugar toast, for watching her dance performances, for loving her, and so on and so forth. Rochelle eventually fell asleep, and when she awoke, found that her grandmother had died in her arms. “As I lay next to my grandmother during the last hours of her life, I felt that the most sacred way to honour her life as she died was to shower her with gratitude,” Rochelle says. “I was so honoured to be able to honour her life and hold her in gratitude as she passed.”

Rochelle’s second initiation into gratitude occurred when she studied energy medicine with shamans in Peru. She was taught a ‘despacho’ gratitude ceremony (creating a mandala out of things like rice, sugar and flowers, as an offering of gratitude for the gods and goddesses) and was given an assignment that changed her life. For six months, Rochelle did not ask for anything. She only said thank you. “In that time I realised, instead of wanting things, the greatest fulfilment is in the gratitude for what is,” Rochelle says. “This perspective changed my life beyond measure.”

Now when Rochelle wakes up in the morning, the first thing she does is turn over into Balasana (Child’s Pose) and say thank you for ten different things, while counting them off on her

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organs to enjoy the world around us. Not only do we have this incredible vehicle, we have minds with which we can explore anything in the creation and express our creativity. All the sacred Tantric arts, from painting to poetry, to music and dance, are the expression of gratitude in action.”

### Gratitude and karma yoga

While Rachel practices gratitude by creating yantras and contemplating the divine, for Katie Manitsas, director of Jivamukti Yoga in Sydney, gratitude is inextricably linked with karma yoga (the yoga of service).

Katie is guided by the Bhagavad Gita, in which karma yoga is emphasised as being one of the paths leading to enlightenment. For Katie, what this means is that when we help others, our own happiness and wellbeing is

thinks of mothers whose children are unwell, or who cannot afford to feed their children properly, and finds that this helps puts her difficulties into perspective. Katie also teaches her children about gratitude, and found that taking them overseas to Asia has helped them to understand that others are less fortunate than themselves, and they are less inclined to ask for more and more toys.

### Honouring life through gratitude

I met Rochelle Scheick recently at the Byron Spirit Festival, where she travelled to Australia to teach a Qoya workshop called ‘Gratitude as a Superpower’. (Qoya is Rochelle’s creation, a combination of yoga, dance, and sensual movement.) On the morning I was due to attend her class, my little girl came down with a

fingers. She then comes into Eka Pada Rajakapotasana (Half Pigeon Pose) and thinks about something in her life that she wants to celebrate, then moves into Virasana (Hero's pose), and visions her day from a place of a grateful heart.

### Gratitude in practice... a personal perspective

Personally, my daily gratitude practice involves silently listing things (and people) I'm grateful for each night before I fall asleep, feeling into the gratitude, rather than just intellectually thinking about it. I start by closing my eyes and visualising what I'm grateful for. At this point it's a pretty intellectual exercise. I then let go of the image in my mind's eye and feel into the effects of the gratitude in my body (in the yogic kosha system this is called the annamaya), breath (pranamaya), emotions (manomaya), and mind (vijñanamaya). The effects of the gratitude practice create a lovely sense of wellbeing and bliss (anandamaya)

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in my entire being. Practicing in this way takes me beyond the intellectual experience of gratitude, and connects me to my heart. When I'm confronted with challenges throughout the day, I make a point of finding at least one thing I'm grateful for in the situation. And in November I'll be joining hundreds of others from around the world again, photographing, and sharing online things I'm grateful for. These simple practices make my days (and my transition to sleep) smoother, easier and happier, and take me right to the heart of Patanjali's santosha (contentment) and aparigraha (non-grasping), as I find more and more that I'm happy with life as it already is.

### Ideas for developing your own gratitude practice

Just now, pause. Take a breath. Right now, in this very moment, what do you feel grateful for? Repeat randomly throughout the day.

If you're a visual person like me, take photographs of things that you're grateful for. Not only will it bring your attention to your object (or subject) or gratitude in a powerful living-in-the-moment kind of way, you'll also have a visual record of it later. Don't worry about the technicalities of photography; a camera phone captures a grateful moment just as well as a professional DSLR. It's your internal

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focus on gratitude that counts, not the external focus of your camera.

Before going to sleep at night, intentionally review all the things you're grateful for from that day. Try 10 gratitudes, counting them off on your fingers like Rochelle.

Start a gratitude journal. A friend of mine writes about all the things she's grateful for one day per week.

Try guided gratitude meditation (you can download one from my web site for free).

When something beautiful happens in your day, take a moment to acknowledge, sit with and perhaps even verbally express your gratitude for the experience.

When something challenging happens in your day, find something in the experience, however small, to be grateful for. Sit with the feeling of gratitude for a while; it may just change the way you experience the difficult situation.

Practice your favourite version of Surya Namaskar (Salute to the Sun), and as you do so, allow your heart to fill with gratitude for the sun, its warmth and its immense effect on our world and our lives.

Try Katie's gratitude meditation. Sit for a while and observe the breath, then on each inhalation say 'blessings to...' and on each exhalation name someone you feel grateful for.

Katie also recommends reading *The Life You Can Save* by Peter Singer, to put things in perspective and make a difference in the world.

There's no right or wrong way. Find your own gratitude path and practice it with abundance. And remember, gratitude isn't an intellectual practice. Allow it to fill your heart, your body and your breath, and it might just change your life.

Further reading

Brene Brown – www.brenebrown.com

Capturing Gratitude – www.capturinggratitude.com

Katie Manitsas – www.jivamuktiyoga.com.au

Peter Singer – www.thelifeyoucansave.com

Rachel Zinman – www.rachelzinmanyoga.com

Robert Emmons – www.greatergood.berkeley.edu/expandinggratitude

Rochelle Scheick – www.rochellescheick.com

Dr Lauren Tober is a yoga teacher, clinical psychologist and photographer based in Mullumbimby and Byron Bay. She is currently busy working on an online yoga course called 'A Daily Dose of Bliss'. You can download a free gratitude meditation on Lauren's website - www.laurentober.com



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