

Text from the Tradition: Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer by Brother David Steindl Rast

The Faculties and the Heart (text drawn from pp. 12, 13-14, 17-18, 19-20, 25, 26-27, 31, 38)

There are degrees of grateful wakefulness. Our intellect, our will, our emotions must wake up. Let us take a closer look at this process of awakening. It is the growth process of gratefulness.

Our intellect should be alert enough to look through the predictable husks of things to their core and find there a kernel of surprise. But truthfulness also demands that the intellect be sufficiently humble, that is, sufficiently down-to-earth to know its limits. The gift character of everything can be recognized, but it cannot be proven—not by the intellect alone. Our will must also play its part. It is the task of the intellect to *recognize* something as a gift, but the will must *acknowledge* its gift character. Recognition and acknowledgement are two different tasks. We can recognize something against our will. The will may refuse to acknowledge what the intellect sees. What confronts us is a given reality, and we recognize it as given. But only if we acknowledge this gift will our recognition lead to gratefulness. Intellect recognizes gift as a gift, our will acknowledges it, but only our feelings respond with joy and so fully appreciate the gift.

Our intellect must steer a straight course between dullness and sophistication in order to recognize the given world as truly a gift...Our will must stay clear of both compulsive self-sufficiency and slavish dependence in order to freely acknowledge the bond that the gift establishes...When we consider the role our feelings play...we have to avoid two traps...One of the two traps in which our feelings can get caught turns us into a wall flower, the other into a vampire. The vampire in us cannot fully enjoy the dance because it is too eager; the wall follower can't because it doesn't care. Intellect, will, and emotions—each has a special role to play, and all three must harmonize in wholehearted gratefulness...When our intellect learns to recognize the gift aspect of the world, when our will learns to acknowledge it, our feelings to appreciate it, ever wider circles of mindfulness make our world come alive...As the ripples expand, we come alive.

Gratefulness is always wholehearted. Our whole person is engaged in it. And this is precisely what the symbol of the heart stands for—the whole person. The heart is not a static symbol. It is dynamic, alive. The heart is the pulsating core of our aliveness in more than merely the physical sense. Gratefulness is full aliveness, and that very aliveness is summed up in the symbol of the heart. All of my past history, all of my future possibilities, this heartbeat in the present moment holds all of it together...The heart is center of our being where intellect and will and feelings, mind and body, past and future come together. When we discover that spot where our life holds together, we discover the heart. That is why I call the heart the taproot of the whole person.

When the Bible tells us how God creates us human beings by breathing life into us, this intimate communion with God is seen as the core of our being human. We are alive with God's own life. Heart, the center of our aliveness, is then also the focal point of our communion with God. The heart is where we meet God...So we know one more thing about the heart: it is our meeting place with God in prayer. When we speak of the heart, we mean wholeness, fullness—the fullness of our being alive, the fullness implied by gratefulness and by prayerfulness.

Teaching on Text from the Tradition: by Christine Luna Munger

Henri Nouwen wrote the forward to Brother David's book, in which he commented on how delightful it was not only to read his work, but to see him teaching in person. Apparently, Brother David is one of those teachers who emanates what he is teaching, full face alit with radiant happiness, full heart ablaze with beaming love, full body dancing around the room as he speaks. Often, when we meet someone who fully embodies Love, we wonder, What is their secret? Brother David insists that there's no secret and that full aliveness is available for all of us, through the simple practice of gratitude.

Oprah Winfrey interviewed Br. David for the Super Soul Sunday event that she hosts. During their interview, Br. David acknowledges that not every moment or happening in life in itself is something to be grateful; and yet, despite bad news, chronic pain, injustice and oppression—all of which are part of life—life still presents, in every second, the opportunity to be grateful. Eyes that see. Ears that hear. No matter what life throws at us, opportunities for gratefulness still abound. So much so, that we need not skimp along in scarcity of gratitude, but we should seek fullness, aliveness. In that same interview, Br. David speaks to being fully alive as also connected to opportunity. He shares with Oprah three steps: Stop. See. Go. first, we must stop and slow down. We must be present to the moment. Second, we must see the good and the beautiful around us. Not just see it but be present to it. Don't just look at the flowers but enjoy them. Then, we must go after it, seize the opportunity. I appreciate that Br. David's simple method is holistic—our bodies, our feelings, our minds, our will, our hearts are all necessary components to being fully alive.

Despite the seeming simplicity of Br. David's practice of gratitude and this three-step method, his teaching falls in line with the best of ancient wisdom teachers, though his message is perhaps more accessible. His teaching about the faculties of intellect, will, emotions and of the heart resonates with the Gurdjieff teachings on the three centers of knowing, which Cynthia Bourgeault has written about, as well as with Jewish and Near-Eastern frameworks for understanding the heart as the center of the person. Most of us have a natural disposition to one or the other centers of knowing, and the simple practice of bringing our awareness to all three of them in harmony with one another, rather than any single-center, can sustain a sense of groundedness that supports being fully alive. For Br. David, the wildly accessible practice of gratitude is like a set of jumper cables that revs up our basic groundedness in the three centers and tunes us into the full voltage of aliveness that is possible when we hold all three centers together in the spaciousness of the cavern of our hearts.

Questions for Reflection:

- What captures your attention from the text and teaching, in your mind, heart, and senses?
- What are you grateful for today? Everyday?
- Based on your self-awareness, which center is your natural resting spot, and how do you tap into the others?

