

Skillful Living Series

# **The Practice of Appreciation**



Venerable Tenzin Tharpa

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## About the Author

### Venerable Tenzin Tharpa

A fully ordained American Buddhist monk in the Tibetan Gelug Tradition, Venerable Tharpa is a teacher, author, and philosopher with over two decades in Tibetan Buddhist studies, half of which spent in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in India.



*Dear reader,*

*Thank you for your interest in this text series. I hope it brings to you the clarity and insight that you seek. In my writing, I endeavor to make the Buddha's teachings available to a wide audience, while also striving to convey to the reader the positive, life-affirming joy that permeates the Buddha's teachings, yet is often lost or overlooked in dry translations. For when understood properly, every aspect of the Buddha's teachings pertains to freedom and liberation: freedom from our daily self-imposed suffering, and liberation from mundane and unsatisfactory existence.*

*Tenzin Tharpa*

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## The Practice of Appreciation

I'm often approached by friends who ask me, *'I'm not interested in Buddhist practice or meditation, I just want to be a happier and more content, do you have something for me?'* In these cases, I would often simply offer some relevant quotes I'd come across in my studies or offer some vague advice. Then, one day, the legitimacy of this question really hit home. *'Yes, this is a sincere question for anyone to ask, whether spiritual practitioners or not.'* This led me to ponder, *'What is the most effective practice for those looking to achieve a basic level of happiness and fulfillment?'* This then became my quest, and my decision, to dedicate my efforts to finding an answer to this question.

I sifted through the countless practices and advice I had received from various prominent teachers on the subject. But I still lacked an appropriate answer. The Buddha's advice on the subject seemed abstract, offering solutions only suitable for dedicated practitioners. Finally, I looked to my own path. What I found was my own sense of happiness and fulfillment was derived mainly from the deep sense of appreciation I possessed, which was the result of many years of dedicated practice. Then came the thought, *what if there was a shortcut in the cultivation of appreciation, so that happiness and contentment, which are its byproducts, could be reached more efficiently.* This is what led to the practice before you. I hope it brings you the happiness and contentment that it brings me, each and every day, in each and every moment.

### The quality of appreciation

Appreciation is an amazing and almost magical mental/emotional quality. A key for unlocking great joy and contentment in our lives. A way to uncover and realize authentic happiness, our true potential, and our authentic selves. A practice for discerning, and grounding us in the true nature of reality.

### Appreciation vs. gratitude

Although often considered synonyms, appreciation and gratitude have subtle differences. Where gratitude can be understood as, a heartfelt thankfulness; being thankful for what is given to us. Appreciation on the other hand, is different. It is deeper than mere thankfulness, possessing insight, understanding, and clarity of the true nature, meaning, quality, and/or preciousness of its object. An example is the difference between being grateful for someone's friendship (thankful for the friendship they give to us) and appreciating them as a friend (acknowledging their worth as a person and your good fortune of having them in your life).

### Our general lack of appreciation

I believe one of the greatest afflictions plaguing humankind is our deep lack of appreciation. When considering the greed and credit debt of the masses, it's clear that few of us are satisfied

with what we have, let alone appreciative of it. However, most of us have enough to be appreciative of; so, what's missing? It's our lack of understanding of the true nature, meaning, or quality of our lives and the people and things within them. Simply put we generally take our lives and everything in them for granted. Often people use expressions like, '*Life sucks*', '*I hate my life*', '*I wish I was dead*', etc., being seemingly blind to the miracle of their own existence.

I believe it's also our lack of appreciation for what we are, that is the cause for our ravenous thirst for more; the source of our hunger for wealth, power, and influence. That we are constantly trying to fill a felt void at an existential level of our being. However, this void is an illusion. For when examined deeply, you'll find that you are, and always have been, whole: overflowing with wonder and potential; you *are* the achievement of the universe. One of my favorite quotes on this subject is from Stephen Batchelor,

*"It has taken four billion years of evolution to generate this kind of organism with this kind of brain, and yet we wake up in the morning and feel bored."*

I think it's also clear that our lack of appreciation (our *ignorance*) of the wonders and potential of our existence is the cause for people to reach out to religion, mysticism, and magic. For when we are blind to the magic and miracle of our own existence, we seek it elsewhere; never realizing that we are the magical beings we seek; we are the ultimate achievement of our universe.

### **Lack of appreciation leading to violence**

With the lack of appreciation for our own existence, comes a lack of appreciation for others. Meaning, when we take for granted the wonder of life, we lose respect for it, allowing hatred, violence, and atrocity to take place.

*"The cultivation of appreciation is one of our most profound practices because it's opposite is one of our most profound afflictions." ~ Tenzin Tharpa*

### **Appreciation as clarity**

Some may contend that the cultivation of appreciation is merely a form of *fake positivity*—a contrived and projected happiness; similar to the condition of *spiritual bypass*—the use of spiritual practices and beliefs to avoid dealing with painful feelings, unresolved wounds, and developmental needs. However, cultivating appreciation is not merely about feeling happy; it's also not merely an antidote. What it is, is cultivating a true glimpse into reality. Meaning, we are not creating something that is not there; instead, we are learning how to see beyond our dull, mundane, and limited daily perceptions. To clearly realize the wonders and astonishment of our true nature and true potential. To open ourselves fully and embrace reality unconditionally.

*"Those who are not abiding in a constant state of awe and astonishment of the condition of our existence, are confined to a life of delusion." ~ Tenzin Tharpa*

### **Appreciation leading to bliss**

Within the deeper levels of appreciation lies the experience of bliss; defined as, *a mental state of unsurpassable joy*. The bliss attainable through meditation, mindfulness, and the practice of appreciation is vastly beyond the pleasures experienced by most. Experientially, this bliss is felt as waves of extreme joy and pleasure that arise, radiate, and/or wash over you.

### **Appreciation and loss**

When we can fully appreciate something, feeling deeply fortunate to have come into contact with it, we can comfortably let it go when separated from it. We can actually appreciate its transitory nature; seeing its fleeting existence as the thing that makes it precious. Like a rare flower that blooms once a year, that one day becomes a celebration of life. We can appreciate its beauty even as it withers and dies; thankful for how fortunate we are to have experienced it.

## **Instruction to The Practice of Appreciation**

*Note:* The practice of appreciation is not always applicable. For realistically, there are times and life situations that are so bleak that one may find no qualities worth appreciating, maybe not even one's life itself. I would assert that those individuals in situations like these wouldn't be looking for a practice of gaining happiness and contentment but instead would be looking for tools to merely survive, which are a different set of practices all together.

The practice of appreciation utilizes an intentional awareness that transcends our common mundane perception, uncovering a clearer perception of reality. During this practice, skepticism and debate need to be *temporarily* suspended. For although skepticism is an invaluable tool in our daily lives, it is counterproductive in this practice. This practice entails exploring the positive side of the spectrum of our reality, or more accurately, at discovering/restoring a healthier and more accurate balance within our spectrum of reality.

This practice is simple. It can be performed anywhere, at any time, whenever you have a few free minutes. It is a practice of contemplation that doesn't require a certain environment or posture. It's also an invisible practice; meaning, no one is aware that you're engaged in it. You can practice it while working, sitting on a park bench, driving down the road, conversing with friends, or feeding the kids. There is no set duration for practice sessions, from a few minutes—up to twenty minutes is fine. And for more profound results, practice appreciation within insight meditation. As with all contemplation practices, we begin by simply reflecting (thinking) on our object of contemplation. There is no formal technique, you merely ponder the object, asking question, while waiting for insight and experience to arise. The aim of the practice is to uncover new depths of understanding of the object and its value. This understanding and insight then

begins to shape our perceptions, uncovering aspects of our lives we have lost sight of or have been taken for granted. This creates a more balanced, holistic, and accurate world view.

The profoundness of this practice is realized with the discovery of the mental states of stillness and presence. Once uncovered, the continued cultivation of these mental states leads to a deep understanding of your true nature and the true nature of reality, which in turn frees us from mundane, habitual, and unsatisfactory existence.

## **The Six Levels of Practice**

These practices, with their corresponding aspirations, are contemplated each morning and throughout the day as needed. The speed of progression through the six levels is based on the experiential result achieved from each level. For some, this could mean practicing each level for a week, a month, or for others just a few days. It entirely depends on your aptitude, effort, duration of practice, and disposition.

Below is the list of levels leading to increasingly deeper levels of appreciation. However, the samples given are merely examples. It's not important if you don't share some of the surface level examples given. For some of us may not have had a loving family, possess a healthy mind or body, acceptable employment, or friends to appreciate. The hope is that you will focus on your own personal objects of appreciation during your practice. Although we all might not share some of the surface level examples given, all humans everywhere, at all times, and in all cultures share the deepest levels of appreciation.

### **Advice for practice**

- For faster results, it's important to approach your practice with joy and positivity
- Remember to temporarily suspend skepticism and debate during the practice
- In the beginning contemplation doesn't appear to be a profound practice, but it is.
- This practice is subtle and gradual and takes some cultivation before effects are seen
- Several short contemplations sessions throughout the day works very well



## Level One

### **Acknowledging your narrow view and what you've been taking for granted.**

This surface level appreciation may sound familiar, for it is often taught to us by our mothers when growing up. I can hear my own mother saying, *"There are starving children who would be very grateful to have that food."*; *"Be thankful you have a family that cares about you"*; *"You should feel fortunate you're receiving a good education"*; or *"Be happy you have a job"*; and our mothers were right. Our mothers were helping us to see the reality beneath our childish life-view. At this initial level, some of the objects of contemplation include, food and shelter, a healthy body, a loving family, friends/colleagues, employment, education, etc.

**Practice:** Take a few minutes to turn your thoughts towards all the things in your life to be thankful for, if possible, reflect deeply enough to gain a felt sensation of warmth at the chest. Also, practice while engaging with others—as you meet to say hello, see others as similar to you—both of you seeking happiness and prosperity—while not wanting to suffer.

**Experience:** At initial levels, with sufficient practice, your mind should become more open and objective, with a broader way of looking at the world, which should feel grounding. Also, curiosity and wonder begin to arise related to this new view. The accomplishment of this level is realized when you have experienced these results from the practice.

**Daily aspiration:** Recited each morning and when engaging in practice.

*Today I begin to see beyond my narrow self-absorbed perceptions;  
To realize the opportunities that my life has allowed, which I've long taken for granted;  
To start to truly appreciate myself and my potential; and the good fortune I have known;  
Today I set out to appreciate and see this truth in others.*





## Level Two

### Acknowledging the wonder of your being

Deeper levels of practice work with more subtle levels of appreciation. Some of the objects of contemplation at this level include: the miracle of biological evolution that we are; our amazing bodies—how our organs work; how the eyes see; how the lungs can take oxygen out of the air; how the heart pumps that oxygen throughout the body; our amazing minds—the creativity, skill, and problem solving; the marvels of our positive traits—our joy, compassion, laughter, resilience; and being part of the human community.

**Practice:** Take a few minutes to turn your thoughts towards the wonders of the human mind and body—look at your hand, what an amazing feat of design and function. Feel your heart beating—appreciate the dedicated work of this astonishing organ. Inspect your senses; the eye and its ability to see, your nose, your ears, the tongue, your skin and its ability to feel; and your mental sense—your inner world of thoughts, ideas, concepts, intentions, emotions, and feelings; reflect on the complex and intricate nature of these senses and what they bring to you. Ponder the abilities of the human species, its creativity, humor, and compassion. Take a moment to grasp the extraordinary being that you truly are. While engaging with others, as you meet to say hello, notice the complexity of the organism before you. The hidden wonders of its internal workings. The knowledge and untapped potential yet to be experienced; the complexity and marvel of its unique life.

**Experience:** At this level, with sufficient practice, feelings of wonder and amazement arise from glimpsing your potential that remains untapped. As you awaken to the truth of your life, appreciation for yourself, as an extraordinary being, arises. The accomplishment of this level is realized when you have experienced these results from the practice.

**Daily aspiration:** Recited each morning and when engaging in practice.

*Today I begin to see beyond my lack of wonder for the uniqueness of my mind and body;  
To realize the miraculous abilities of my mental and physical senses  
To start to truly appreciate the miracle of biological evolution that I am;  
Today I set out to appreciate and see this truth in others.*

## Level Three

### Appreciating our accomplishments

Another area we greatly under appreciate is our ingenuity, skill, efficiency, and use of technology. From the simplest things like the box in our kitchens that keeps food cold, putting nourishment at our fingertips; or fresh drinking water on demand from any faucet in our homes. Most under-appreciated our education systems until they visit less fortunate parts of our world. Additionally, I think the efficiency within our daily lives is deeply undervalued. Like public transportation that carries vast amounts of commuters, at very little cost or effort; or our efficiency in farming, feeding billions of people on this planet with a relatively small amounts of farms and effort.

**Practice:** Take a few minutes to turn your thoughts towards the wonders and achievements of the human species, its ingenuity, skill, efficiency, and use of technology. Take a moment to really appreciate the level of our technical advancement. Look at the phone in your hand, it has more power and information than a roomful of computers in the past; or that every call you make is being beamed into space before coming back down to the other end of the call. Ponder all the daily comfort you enjoy from these achievements, your warm house, your hot shower, your washing machine. Contemplate the achievements of modern medicine; imagine what human ingenuity will bring to us in the future, space travel, an end to sickness, poverty, violence, and injustice.

**Experience:** At this level, with sufficient practice, feelings of being blessed to live at a time of such comfort, arises. As you begin to fully realize the human potential, wonders of where it will take us in the future arise. One's Imagination is drawn to what could be; the possibilities that are available to us. The accomplishment of this level is realized when you have experienced these results from its practice.

**Daily aspiration:** Recited each morning and when engaging in practice.

*Today I begin to see beyond my mundane view of human achievement;  
To realize the wonders of our ingenuity, skills, efficiency, and technology;  
To start to truly appreciate our achievements and the comfort they allow;  
Today I set out to appreciate and see this truth in others.*

## Level Four

### Acknowledging your tenuous place in the universe

This level of contemplation delves into analysis of our lives at the existential level. Objects of contemplation at this level include the appreciation of our existence, this magical orb we call home, and the astonishing truths of our place in the universe. Also, the remarkable fortune of being born a human being out of all other lifeforms, the only species that can transcend our basic visceral impulses—to choose to be more than animal.

**Practice:** Take a few minutes to turn your thoughts towards the wonders of our existence and place in the universe. That our planet is hurling through space at 110,000 kilometers per hour, traversing a vast unexplored universe. Contemplate the fortune of being born a human—with all its astounding potential. Ponder the rare gift it grants you—the option of transcending our animal nature. When engaging with others, as you meet to say hello, recognize the amazing being before you, the most advance creature in the universe (as currently known). Ponder how truly unique each human is from others and the preciousness and potential of each of their lives.

**Experience:** At this level, with sufficient practice, you may start to actually begin to glimpse the deeper reality that underlies our common/conventional existence. The reality that exists beneath our shopping, T.V. shows, sports scores, and video games. A feeling of awe at the mysteries of life begins to arise. As the ground of our conventional views is slowly pulled away, sometime feelings of fear are felt. This is the first glimpse of the true groundless state of reality. That the only security is to contently accept insecurity. Meaning, accepting and finding a comfortable place in the notion that you are a speck, existing on a pinhead, whirling around a chaotic and mysterious universe. As you become comfortable in this new reality, any remaining fear turns into wonder and awe at the magnificence of life. The accomplishment of this level is realized when you have experienced these results from its practice.

**Daily aspiration:** Recited each morning and when engaging in practice.

*Today I begin to see beyond my lack of wonder for my place in the universe;  
To realize the mysterious, uncertain, and precious nature of my existence;  
To start to truly appreciate the miracle I call my life;  
Today I set out to appreciate and see this truth in others.*

## Level Five

### Acknowledging stillness and your place in the present moment

At this level of contemplation, lies the clearest glimpse of reality. With deeper contemplations and insights, comes the arising of sensations of stillness and presence. Objects of contemplation at this level turn to the present moment and include: that you are truly alive right here, right now; that you exist instead of not existing; recognizing the stillness, contentment, and vast potential in this and every moment.

**Practice:** Take a few minutes to still yourself, clear your mind and turn your thoughts towards this very present moment. Become fully present by recognizing the stillness, peace, and contentment that underlies it. Begin to reduce or transcend thinking; recognize the present moment as the very ground of all potentials and possibilities.

**Experience:** At this level, with sufficient practice, you can experience the felt sensation of stillness, presence, and objective distance, experiencing the present moment just as it is, without interpretation. You become the observing witness to the present moment, experienced as a feeling of a slight backing away from the world; time seems to slow, and feelings of stability/maturity increase. There is a shift to a more even perception, feeling one's inner-world and outer-world in proper balance. There's a felt reduction in one's speed. While the intense immediacy that normally plagues us, is replaced by spaciousness and joy. At a more profound engagement, appreciation becomes more than contemplation; it becomes a felt sensation that can be generated and experienced at will. A felt positivity and contentment, holding limitless energy. At this stage the feeling of appreciation can become constant within your day. At its peak, appreciation can become bliss, appearing as waves arising, radiating, and washing over you. Through expanding/radiating your awareness peripherally, this bliss can be increased exponentially. The accomplishment of this level is realized when you have experienced these results from its practice.

**Daily aspiration:** Recited each morning and when engaging in practice.

*Today I become the observing witness to the present moment;*

*Transcending my regrets and worries, by abiding in presence and stillness;*

*Today I start to truly appreciate the contentment that has always underlined my life;*

*Today I set out to appreciate and see this truth in others.*

## Level Six

### Acknowledging the Buddha's teachings

For Buddhists practitioners, this last level turns our appreciation towards the Buddha.

**Practice:** Take a few minutes to turn your thoughts towards the Buddha's teachings; our good fortune of coming into contact with them; the efforts made to preserve them so that future generations can also taste liberation; appreciation for the wondrous way in which the Buddha asserted sentient beings to exist; and the appreciation of *emptiness* and the potential that it allows.

**Experience:** Feelings of appreciation for the Buddha and his compassion in sharing his teachings so that others may awaken, arise. A thirst for practice should increase from the realization of your good fortune to have access to the teachings. At this level, experientially, emptiness is felt as stillness (shared above in detail on 'Level five - Acknowledging stillness and your place in the present moment'). The accomplishment of this level is realized when you have experienced these results from its practice. The topic, teachings, and experience of emptiness are shared later in the text series.

**Daily aspiration:** Recited each morning and when engaging in practice.

*Today I begin to see beyond my limited and halfhearted aspirations;  
To realize the rare and profound gift of the Buddha's dharma;  
To start to truly appreciate and diligently practice the Buddha's teachings  
Today I set out to appreciate the Buddha-nature in others*



## Sustained Appreciation

At the peak of this practice, when all levels have been experientially achieved, lies the attainment of *sustained appreciation*, often referred to as *grace*. A mental state of continuously sustained presence, stillness, and appreciation. A balanced and objective view filled with bliss, contentment, fulfillment, and peace. The womb of the altruistic heart from which pours empathy, loving-kindness, and care. A refuge from our suffering and the ground of our compassion.

Once this state of is attained, you can maintain it by reciting this aspiration each morning.

### Sustained Appreciation Aspiration

*Today I abide as the observing witness to the present moment;  
I appreciate myself, my vast potential, and the good fortune I have known;  
I appreciate the opportunities and comfort that my life has allowed;  
I appreciate the miracle of biological evolution that I am;  
I appreciate the wonders of human ingenuity, skills, efficiency, and technology;  
I appreciate the mysterious, uncertain, and precious nature of my existence;  
Today I abide in the stillness and contentment that has always underlined my life.*

Additionally, for Buddhists:

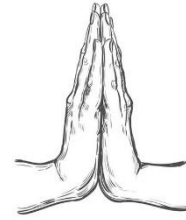
*Today I appreciate the Buddha and his infinite compassion for teaching the dharma.*



## Other Practices of Appreciation

### The practice of anjali

*Anjali* (Pali): The gesture of joining the palms together at the heart; a transcultural gesture to show reverence and/or appreciation. A common greeting gesture within Indian cultures, which is accompanied with the phrase *namaste*, meaning ‘*I bow to the divine in you*’, or my own interpretation, ‘*I recognize and appreciate you*’.



The anjali gesture exists in all cultures. It symbolizes prayer in almost all religions and is a universal gesture for sincerity, used when pleading, begging, promising, or giving heart-felt gratitude. However, with that said, I believe within all of its various uses we can see a common thread that runs through them, a display, sign, and symbol of appreciation. When offering anjali, we are saying that we appreciate something, be it a friend, loved one, gods, or others’ qualities like empathy, compassion, or forgiveness. We commonly use anjali to indicate appreciation for wonderful weather, a wish come true, a fun or restorative day off, or even a much-deserved break from a tedious task. For myself, I often draw my hands into anjali while saying ‘*deep appreciation*’. I use this for a simple meal dedication or recognition of something I find important, beautiful, or memorable. Of course, anjali is also the most common greeting gesture when meeting a Buddhist monastic.

### Appreciative eating

This is a practice that utilizes mindfulness. Appreciative eating is usually done in silence. That means no TV, surfing the net, music, reading, or conversation. While generating a foundation of appreciative joy, begin by examining the food, turning the plate and inspecting it from all sides. Smell the food and take in its aroma; try to discern the various ingredients. Take a moment to generate appreciation for the food, the care and love in its preparation, the difficulty in its cultivation, and its magical ability to nourish and prolong sentient life. Next put a small spoonful of the food in your mouth and then set your spoon down. Next, chew slowly and chew completely before swallowing, note/label the activity, ‘*eating*’. Bring your full awareness to the task, become one with the activity by immersing yourself in all the sensations, smells, and tastes. Within the mouth, taste every bite fully; feel the food moving around your mouth; become aware of the intricate skill of the tongue; discern the abundance of flavors. Swallow the food and feel it go down your throat, feel the warmth of the food in your stomach. At the end of the meal, observe the satisfying feeling of being full, close your eyes and delve deeply into your appreciation for the nourishment and pleasure of the meal. Remain in this state and let bliss arise and engulf you. Bathe in the bliss of the present moment.

### **Meal dedication**

*This meal before us symbolizes abundance and prosperity, health and wellness, and also friendship, family, and community.*

*Within it we find great love and care in its preparation,*

*Great joy and happiness in its sharing,*

*Great delight and pleasure in its many tastes and textures,*

*As well as the anticipation of a full and content stomach at the meals end.*

*Conversely,*

*At the same time we must maturely recognize that this meal also represents life's suffering.*

*For within it we find, vast hours of backbreaking labor in its cultivation,*

*Great sorrow in the loss of small innocent life in its harvest,*

*Great greed and unfairness in its commerce,*

*And of course, our inevitable dissatisfaction in its many imperfections.*

*It is through reflecting on both of these truths, that we generate deep appreciation.*

*So, as we reflect on these truths, let us eat mindfully, being present and aware.*

*Let us eat in moderation and balance, to nourish and fuel our hearts, minds, and bodies.*

*Let us eat joyfully with appreciation, enjoying the company of our friends, families, community.*

*Let us eat so we can be productive on our path and in our commitment to benefit others.*

*~ Venerable Tenzin Tharpa*

### **----- Important Notes -----**

- If difficulties in your practice persist, it's always a good idea to seek additional one-on-one advice from a qualified teacher.
- Meditation, mindfulness, and Buddhism were not intended as medical therapy. For those who suffer from mental, social, and/or emotional disorders, it's always best to work with a therapist or specialized teacher in the field. Currently, there are a growing number of therapists and specialized teachers that can instruct patients in meditation, mindfulness, and Buddhist practices.
- Lastly, if for any reason you feel vulnerable, unstable, or just a bit down, reach out to others. Be it family, friends, or professional caregivers, there are so many wonderful people in this world who wish to help others.