



Module #10 of 10—*Short Version*

**UK Extension's
Universe of**

Possibilities™

SKILLS FOR CREATING HAPPINESS AND BLESSING OTHERS

Gifts of Gratitude and Blessing

Sometimes, invaluable treasures lie right in front of us, just waiting to be more fully and creatively used. Such is the case with the gifts of gratitude and blessing. Gratitude has to do with feeling and expressing appreciation. Blessing is the act of giving something positive to another in thought, word, or deed.

Having a thankful heart and reaching out in blessing to others are hardly new concepts. That's part of their beauty: They are easily understood, are widely recognized as valuable, and are used by diverse groups of people. But we have only begun to tap the potential of these amazing tools. The possibilities and benefits are immense.

Counselors, philosophers, and all major religions encourage expressing gratitude and blessing others, and researchers have discovered that these practices are associated with an impressive array of positive outcomes both for givers and receivers. Even when carried out solely on the level of thought, as in silent prayer, significant positive changes in health and overall well-being have been documented. Researchers also have found that positive thoughts produce benefits even when directed toward animals, plants, fungi, bacteria, and blood cells. To the imaginative mind, the potential of these findings is staggering.

Target of Life. Look at the Target of Life symbol that appears at the upper left side of this page. Put yourself on the Target in the center of the heart. Notice that the heart of the Target is clear, unobstructed, full of light. From there, you see clearly and make choices that are good for you and those around you. You feel peaceful, energetic, creative. Your reflexes are sharp, your immune system strong. You stumble and fall less often, and you handle life's inevitable challenges with more confidence and skill. You are naturally more sensitive to others—more patient, generous, and understanding. The more deeply centered you are in the heart of the Target of Life, the more love you feel and share. You are at your best—physically, mentally, and spiritually.

However, when difficulties arise and things don't go your way, you're likely to be pulled off center into the darker areas of the Target. You say and do things you regret. Your immune system weakens and your productivity declines. You lose touch with what's really important to you. Unhealthy stress increases and your sensitivity toward others decreases. And the further away from the center you move, the worse it gets! You experience more heaviness and darkness, more fear and negativity. That's why it's so important to catch early signs of stress and to use all of your creativity to stay as centered as possible.



7 Core Principles



- 1 Almost any individual, relationship, family, organization, community, or nation can benefit from the skillful application of gratitude and blessing.
- 2 Gratitude, the skill of feeling and expressing appreciation, can be beneficially practiced on three levels of increasing difficulty: (1) for what is unexpected and wonderful; (2) for the positives in life that we often take for granted; and (3) for the various challenges that test our resolve and creativity and that often contain hidden blessings.
- 3 As with gratitude, blessing—the act of giving something positive to another—can be effectively practiced in thought, word, and overt action.
- 4 Mounting research has documented the substantial power of both prayer and intentionally directed thought.
- 5 With gratitude and blessing, both the giver and receiver reap important and substantial benefits.
- 6 The applications of gratitude and blessing are virtually unlimited, can be used by anyone, require no waiting periods or large capital investments, transcend ideological differences, and are wonderfully contagious.
- 7 Remember, the more centered you are on the Target of Life, the greater your well-being, the wiser your choices, and the more effective you are in everything you do.

The gifts of gratitude and blessing: In a world where most promising solutions come with major price tags, these problem-solvers are essentially free. And while proposals for bettering our lives often spark controversy, gratitude and blessing have a universal, almost innate appeal.

Fortunately, gratitude and blessing seem tailor-made for our time-pressured, stressed-out society. Often requiring little or no extra time, they can do wonders for reducing the burden of stress that wears heavily on our physical well-being and diminishes our creativity, spiritual attunement, and joy. Surely every individual, relationship, family, organization, and community can benefit from the increased use of gratitude and blessing.

These two gifts are easy to use, they're fun, and they generate positive feelings in ourselves and others. Scientific studies have increasingly documented their physiological, mental, and social benefits. ***Best of all, we've only begun tapping into the many ways in which we can more powerfully and creatively employ gratitude and blessing.***

DEFINING GRATITUDE AND BLESSING

Gratitude is the skill of feeling and expressing appreciation. The expression of thanksgiving may take place silently in a person's mind and heart or may be expressed outwardly to one or more people. ***Blessing is the act of extending something positive to another in thought, word, or overt action.*** Of course, gratitude and blessing are

interrelated and often overlap. For example, expressing sincere appreciation to someone can simultaneously be a way of blessing that person, and a visible act of blessing another will often elicit a return expression of gratitude.

BENEFITS OF THE GRATITUDE ATTITUDE

When we take a few moments to express our appreciation inwardly or to another, we begin to feel happier and more relaxed. Physician and author Christiane Northrup explains that when you hold feelings of thankfulness for at least 15 to 20 seconds, beneficial changes take place in your body. Levels of the stress hormones cortisol and norepinephrine decrease, producing an array of metabolic benefits. Coronary arteries relax, thus increasing the blood supply to your heart. And your breathing becomes deeper, raising the oxygen level in your tissues.

Scientists at the Institute of HeartMath have discovered that thoughts and even subtle emotions influence the functioning of the autonomic nervous system. This is significant in that the autonomic nervous system interacts with the digestive, cardiovascular, immune, and hormonal systems. Negative thoughts and emotions create autonomic nervous system imbalance, while positive ones encourage physiological balance and strength.

Interestingly, of the numerous positive thought patterns tested by the Institute of HeartMath, appreciation appears to have a particularly strong effect in quickly enhancing the functioning of the autonomic nervous system, resulting in improved hormonal and immune system balance and more effective brain functioning.

HeartMath researchers also have discovered that when an individual engages in thoughts of appreciation, almost immediately his or her heart rate variability smooths out, indicating heightened psychophysiological coherence—a state associated with reduced stress, increased emotional stability, high performance, and a range of health benefits.

THREE LEVELS OF THANKSGIVING

It's easy to be thankful when wonderful things happen to us. That is the first level of gratitude. We reach the second level when we learn to

express appreciation for the many blessings that we often take for granted—examples include good health, refreshing water to drink, the freedom to speak our minds, and the ability to help shape the future.

How easy it is to take our health, our talents, and our loved ones for granted! One of the true joys of life is learning to take nothing for granted. As we gradually master this ability, we approach each moment with fresh eyes, and our hearts brim over with appreciation and peace.

The third and most challenging level of thanksgiving is to maintain a positive, grateful attitude even when confronted with problems. Of course, we need to deal intelligently with our problems and the associated emotions. Yet, even in the midst of difficult circumstances, the ordeal can be softened significantly by a spirit of gratitude. For example, wrecking your car would be unfortunate. But you might have much to be grateful for: that you are alive, that no one was seriously hurt, that you have a good insurance policy, and that you now know to be more careful on wet roads.

BENEFITS OF EXTENDING BLESSINGS

When we bless another person in tangible ways, such as providing food, shelter, money, or encouraging words, the benefits are fairly obvious. However, is there substantial evidence that intangible blessings in the form of thoughts and feelings also produce positive changes?

The answer is yes. According to physician and prayer expert Larry Dossey, more than 100 controlled laboratory research studies show, in general, that prayer or concentrated thoughts of compassion, kindness, and love frequently result in healthful changes in a variety of living things, from humans to plants to bacteria. In fact, the mounting research evidence supporting the effectiveness of prayer is so compelling that Dr. Dossey and other physicians have said that to *not* offer prayer to patients as a potential treatment option may, in the future, be considered a breach of medical practice.

THE ART OF BLESSING OTHERS

The potential ways in which we might bless others are nearly infinite. Expressing one's creativity in song,

dance, paint, or poetry can be a form of blessing others if that is the sincere and frequent intention of the artist. Similarly, the strong and consistent intention to give of one's love and skills can make teaching, homemaking, science, and business equally valid and marvelous ways to extend blessings to others. Also falling into the category of powerful blessings are caring, heartfelt prayers, and deep meditation in its many varieties.

We can bless others with a good word or a smile, a kind action that goes completely unobserved, or simply a good wish in silence.

David Steindl-Rast

BEWARE OF THE OPPOSITES OF GRATITUDE AND BLESSING

Here's the bottom line: *While gratitude and blessing carry enormous positive power, their opposites—complaining/negativity and unkind thoughts and actions directed toward others—have great power to harm and should, therefore, be strictly avoided.*



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10 Educational Modules

UK Extension's Universe of Possibilities™: Skills for Creating Happiness and Blessing Others is an educational series containing 10 modules. Each module is accompanied by a Macromedia Flash® movie, a PowerPoint® presentation, and other teaching tools. All these resources, along with a Facilitator's Guide, are available free-of-charge in camera-ready format at the following website: www.ca.uky.edu/fcs/possibilities.

1. **Your Vision Map**
2. **Making the Growth Choice**
3. **The Way of Peace**
4. **Heart Intelligence**
5. **The Freedom of Self-Discipline**



6. **Embracing This Present Moment**
7. **Accepting and Loving Your Body**
8. **Healthy Relationships**
9. **Unleashing Your Creativity**
10. **Gifts of Gratitude and Blessing**

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Shedding further light on the danger associated with the opposites of gratitude and blessing, leading-edge research suggests that we live in a common “field of energy,” so that what we do to others, for better or worse, we are, in a very real sense, doing to ourselves. If this is indeed true, then anything less than showing compassion, understanding, and love for one another is like self-inflicted punishment—something, of course, that we want to avoid.

BE A POWERFUL FORCE FOR GOOD

Primarily in your heart, but also outwardly, express heartfelt gratitude for even small blessings. Develop an eagle's eye for the best in those around you, and freely extend warm compliments and encouragement. Radiate kindness, healing energy, and good cheer.

Wherever you are, as you feel led to do so, send blessings instantaneously to those around you. You can do this with groups as well as with individuals. Because you extend these blessings on the level of thought, you have few limits, and no one has to know what you are doing. You can scatter blessings of kindness, healing, encouragement, and joy anytime—while at the grocery store, in an airport, on the subway, or as you walk down the street.