

## Twelve Positive Habits of Spiritually Centered People

Notes from the book by Mark Thurston and Sarah Thurston (available on Amazon.com)

Dr. Mark Thurston is an educator, psychologist and author of several books on spirituality and holistic living. He was one of my professors at Atlantic University and is an expert on Edgar Cayce, an early twentieth century clairvoyant. Cayce was one of the forerunners of the modern holistic movement which advocates health through balance. What makes his work particularly valuable is that his trance-induced recommendations for wellness were systematically documented, creating a researchable database of about 14,000 readings. Thurston's book culls Cayce's readings for recurrent best practices recommended by Cayce to individuals seeking a healthy, spiritually-centered way of life. Thurston acknowledges that habits can be counter-productive to soul growth, but says, "If we look more closely at the nature of personal transformation, we'll see that there really is a place for constructive, life-affirming 'habits'...patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting that are done on a regular basis and serve to awaken us." Here are the resulting twelve simple and practical habits for modern-day, busy people who want to stay spiritually-centered:

### #1 Start the Day Right

In the first minute of our waking day, we set the tone of the day. This is the most influential minute of our day because it is a transition, and transitions contain both a void and an opportunity. To take full advantage of the opportunity inherent in this transition moment, let's understand and differentiate the two aspects of self: Personality and Individuality. Personality is the outer part, the façade or persona, which operates on autopilot. The Individuality is the inner, authentic spiritual self. Both aspects have value but Personality will dominate if unchecked.

Here is the daily habit that lets your individuality, not your personality, set the tone for your day: in that first waking moment adopt a prayerful attitude that invites personal guidance. Dedicate your first minute to God. Using verbiage that is right for you, ask, "God, what would you have me do with this day?" Lie there and repeat the question over and over until you get to a place of trust and surrender. Then start your day.

### #2 Three-Minute Meditation

A meditation practice has many documented physical, mental and spiritual benefits: improved heart health, increased relaxation, mitigated chronic stress, improved concentration and creativity, and numerous other benefits. Thurston says, "Meditation is listening to the divine within." While longer meditations offer more rewards, short, regular meditation sessions can produce clear, positive results. Thurston recommends the habit of three-minute meditations, daily. It is not necessary to use a timer or be too concerned about the exact length of meditation. The benefit of this habit is in doing it daily.

To practice this habit, find a time in your day that works for you. It doesn't even have to be the same time each day. Find a quiet spot; sit comfortably; close your eyes and settle down; surrender worries and expectations; scan your body for tension areas, and release them; get centered on your breathing; focus on an ideal or intention, if you like. Don't worry about reaching an exact time goal. Allow the meditation to come to a natural ending. You'll be amazed how these few minutes effect your whole day.

### **#3 The Inner Witness: Practicing Self-Observation**

Wake up and become creative and vital by practicing this simple technique which, when done three times daily for even a minute at a time, can have life-changing results.

Again we differentiate and utilize the two aspects of self: Personality (outer façade) and Individuality (genuine, connected to Spirit). Remember, neither is good or bad—they are just parts of the whole. Personality portrays itself in roles: parent, friend, spouse, boss, colleague, customer, etc. Create a role called “The Witnessing Self” from which, as Cayce put it, you “stand and watch Self go by.” This is the practice of splitting your attention between what you are actually doing and a more removed observation of the role you’re playing in the moment.

The Witnessing Self doesn’t judge or criticize. It practices loving, objective self-observation so you can recognize recurring themes as well as misperceptions of yourself. Practice for at least one minute at a time, three times per day. Try to observe: inner talk, automatic emotions, and automatic behaviors and actions. It is not as easy as it may sound, but it is very revealing and empowering.

### **#4 The Pace of Life**

Thurston references the fable of the tortoise and the hare, which depicts the two extremes most of us vacillate between, and suggests our highest quality experiences come when we integrate the two. He says, “With careful attention and right effort we can adopt an optimal pace for living that allows relaxation and peace and, at the same time, gets things done with right-timing.”

Observe yourself during the day and become sensitive to feelings of hurriedness or laziness. Then think about what you need in that moment to feel relaxed and peaceful while accomplishing what you wish to accomplish. This is the principle of right-timing, heeding the intuitive voice that knows what you need to do, when, for your greatest good. Neither stress nor idleness is optimal—balance is required—one that provides motivation as well as time for relaxation and reflection.

To make a regular habit of setting your pace of life, think of your pace as a number, sort of like we think of the speed of a car in miles per hour. Each day, select your goal target pace for the day in terms of a number. Keep that number in your mind, combined with awareness of feelings of hurriedness or laziness throughout the day, and adjust your “speed” to your goal.

### **#5 Balanced Living**

Finding the point of equilibrium in the continual tug-of-war between competing opposites within ourselves is a matter of balancing self-interest and interest in the needs of others. Thurston suggests, “Hold on to both sides of this pair of opposite impulses and achieve a healing synthesis.”

It doesn’t work to demand balance of one’s self. Balance is gained gradually one or two life areas at a time. The gradual gaining of balance gives us momentum to feel more in control of life as a whole, and eventually gain balance in other areas, too. Creating habits of balance is a process. Balance is not always 50:50. Balance shifts. Balance is about direction—for example, making choices that improve your diet gradually, or that recognize and honor your needs in relationships—and not about achieving some goal or imagined balance ideal. Relationships can be particularly challenging to keep balanced. It is most effective to work, first, toward nurturing a healthy relationship with Self, and then other relationships will more easily fall into line. Make it a practice to identify your

needs and to make small, steady changes in the direction of meeting them.

### **#6 Self-Assertion and Healthy Will**

Much of our stress comes from not understanding or making positive use of our Free Will. Cayce said the right use of Will is the pivotal factor in getting one's life on track. It is the proper application of self-assertion, and not an invitation to aggressive, self-serving behavior. Self-assertion is an affirmation of one's self, getting in touch with who you are and projecting that image out into the world. This positive habit is about choosing to assert your best self (individuality) rather than your fear-based self (personality). It starts with observing your actions and recognizing which part of you is shining through. Personality is reactive and predictable; it responds automatically. Individuality applies Free Will, making conscious choices about how to react and what to do. Here are five practical things you can do on a daily bases to express healthy Free Will:

1. Stick to decisions you've made: treat your priorities like priorities.
2. Express positive feelings: praise, compliments, pleasure, appreciation.
3. Communicate negative feelings: constructively, directly, honestly, respectfully.
4. Set limits: provide clear, loving instructions about how you want to be treated.
5. Take initiatives: take action on your beliefs, ideas, needs and desires.

### **#7 Picture Yourself: Using Creative Visualization for Change**

Isn't this exciting!?... "Anything about ourselves that we want to transform is within our reach if we use the mind skillfully." Wow! Visualization is a powerful tool for creating desired change. Visualization is the use of specific mental imagery linked to a clear motivation and purpose. Visualization works. Advertisers use it. Athletes use it. Spiritually-centered people use it.

When it comes to visualization, few people are capable of seeing clear, graphic visual images. Most of us get a vague visual accompanied by a more significant feeling. The benefits of visualization come from the efforts—the pointing of your mental capacities in the desired direction—not from achieving the visual in your mind. Success with visualization is linked to the ability to feel the desired physical and emotional feelings.

Some cautions: visualization is not a short cut; visualization should not be used to manipulate the thoughts, feelings or actions of someone else (to do so would override their free will).

Cayce's most frequent recommendation about visualization is to use it for self-healing. For this approach to stimulate healing—with or without mainstream medical assistance—we must be sincerely engaged in the visualization, not just doing it by rote. Also, it is recommended that we study a little anatomy and understand how the body works.

Visualization can also be used for mental healing—to alter our attitudes, emotions and behaviors. To use this approach, target specific changes you wish to make. Thurston offers four possible changes that work well with visualization:

1. Smiling more often in interactions with people
2. Listening more carefully to people when they speak
3. Enjoying daily exercise
4. Immediately forgiving and not taking personally the words and deeds of others

Here are important components of a visualization session:

1. Have a clear purpose that resonates to your highest spiritual ideals
2. Close your eyes and create a clear mental image. Closing your eyes allows you to focus. To create a clear image in your mind, imagine success. Be specific. Visualize as much detail as you can. Include the attitude, emotion and behavior you desire. Or, begin with a memory you'd like to re-write. Re-create a past scene or event in your mind and imagine the thoughts, feelings or behaviors you would have preferred.
3. Fill the images with feeling. Experience real desire.
4. In the end, release the image—let go of expectations about when or how it will manifest. This is one of the paradoxes of the spiritual path: engage fully and in full faith and then release attachment to the outcome. Trust that you will receive what you need. Watch for results but don't become preoccupied by them.

A good time to practice visualization is at the end of your meditations. You can use visualization regularly—daily or even several times during the day—to keep yourself charged and focused on a goal. Remember, visualization is not a short-cut; it simply assists you in making the changes you desire or in reaching your goals. Your efforts toward your desired outcome are still required.

To apply this positive habit to your life, target a specific change you want to make. Identify something in yourself—an attitude, emotion or behavior—that you want to alter. Set aside two or three minutes a day to engage in focused visualization. Then, pay attention to the results that manifest in your life.

### **#8 Tolerance: The Magic Ingredient in Human Relationships**

One attitude above all others can transform our relationships—tolerance. “Tolerance is the face of love.” It is how we give other people the freedom to be themselves, while at the same time deepening relationships through caring.

Relationship issues are second only to health issues in the Cayce readings. To all of the dilemmas—marriage, divorce, parenting, work relations, friendships, rivalries—there was one common response: getting along with people requires tolerance.

Tolerance is an elusive quality that requires a forgiving spirit. It involves a willingness to dismiss something that seems wrong or unfair, and to give other people the benefit of the doubt. It requires a certain “flexibility of spirit” so that things can keep going even when someone hasn't measured up to what they ought to be or could be with a little more effort.

Most of us fall short in practicing this positive habit. Caring or loving another is not the same as being tolerant. In fact, our loving concern can easily become “egotistical” when we let biases, personal expectations, and rigidity make us intolerant, and our relationships suffer as a result.

Thurston presents the psychology of intolerance. In the moment when we are not getting along with others or we're highly critical, our judgmental, impatient feelings make a lot of sense. Tolerance actually feels illogical in these circumstances. Our minds are usually alert for faults and inconsistencies, so we're inclined to pounce on the short comings of others. We hold others strictly accountable. We're quick to react to their errors. Perhaps because of this, we feel people are always looking over our shoulders, watching and judging our mistakes.

If we want healthy relationships, we have to break this cycle of intolerance. Tolerance is a skill, and it is gained by practice. Our personal relationships benefit, as does our global society that so desperately needs more tolerance. The population on the planet is projected to double by 2050. More people mean more ideas, points of view and beliefs, and therefore more potential for conflict and offense. We must learn to deal with differences and conflict in a constructive way.

To begin to practice the positive habit of tolerance, consider these aspects:

- **Forgiveness.** This is the very essence of tolerance—a forgiving spirit and a willingness to put offenses and hurts aside. This doesn't mean excusing or accepting harmful behavior. It means disapproving of bad behavior without disapproving of the person. It is the ability to recognize people's shortcomings while, at the same time, seeing their positive sides, too. Sometimes this is relatively simple and instantaneous, and sometimes, when the issue is more deeply-rooted, it can take months, years, and even lifetimes, unless a conscious, focused effort is made. Forgiveness can be practiced (emphasis on practiced) in at least a small level each day.

- **Nonjudgment.** Refraining from judgment is closely related to forgiveness, but it is more far-reaching. Thurston writes, "Any kind of condemnation rarely if ever serves our own best interests or those of the other person." A judgmental attitude only makes our lives harder. We cannot control the lifestyle of others, nor completely avoid interacting with them. Judgment hurts the object of our disapproval and ourselves as well by undermining our spiritual and physical health.

- **Broad-mindedness.** Tolerance allows for everyone's points of view. In our confrontive, contentious, combative society, it is sometimes erroneously considered a weakness to appreciate another's point of view. However, the positive habit of tolerance strengthens our ability to hold onto our own beliefs while having sympathetic appreciation for the beliefs of others. To do this, momentarily suspend your own reasoning and try to imagine what is going on in the other person's mind.

- **Refraining from Arguments.** The first three features of tolerance—forgiveness, nonjudgment and broad-mindedness—are inward experiences, and the fourth is directed outward in our behavior. Intolerance leads to disputes. When we use self-control to overcome the compulsion to argue, we break the cycle of intolerance. If, we come to the point of disagreement, we can hear and heed the voice inside that says, "stay calm," we come to the essence of tolerance. Arguments seldom change anything. People who are very sure of themselves are cautioned to avoid becoming argumentative when they disagree.

Tolerance is an empowering positive habit, but it is not a perfect virtue. Tolerance is not always the best choice. There are times when we need to speak up or respectfully challenge someone. Tolerance is not to be used to avoid confrontation. Another mis-use of tolerance is to use it to congratulate ourselves—to make it be about feeling good about ourselves. Or, if we aren't careful, we can seem forgiving, broad-minded and tolerant when really we are practicing self-serving patience or restraint. This is actually a hallmark of a codependent relationship.

To apply this positive habit to your life, look for ways you can practice the four aspects of tolerance--forgiveness, broadmindedness, nonjudgment and refraining from arguments--in your close relationships and daily interactions. Try respecting a difference of opinion between you and another family member, or cutting some slack to a noisy neighbor or bad driver. You may be pleasantly surprised by the responses you get.

## #9 The Sixth Sense in Sleep

Cayce often encouraged people who came to him for answers to tap into their own innate ability to get reliable answers from within. We can access this sixth sense while we are sleeping. But how???? Where does the mind go while the physical body refreshes itself in sleep? The mind is still active. During our waking hours, our mind is largely concerned with the physical information from our five senses, but while we sleep those senses are largely dormant. In sleep, the mind is engaged by our sixth sense: our intuition.

There are two primary periods during which the sixth sense provides guidance: during our dreams and in the moments between sleep and wakefulness. Dreams are filled with insights, but may be difficult to recall once we awaken. For that reason it may be more fruitful to utilize those few moments between full sleep and full wakefulness because the information is equally valuable but easier to remember.

Cayce placed a lot of importance on the transformative potential in dreams. He believed our dreaming mind is a vast storehouse of information accessible only when we are free from the dominance of our five senses. Spiritually centered people make a habit of using that wealth of information to enhance their waking lives. Thurston provides the following questions to reveal the insights dreams offer:

- 1. How am I different from having this dream?** A dream can often precipitate a shift in attitude or perspective, even when the dream doesn't make sense or cannot be completely recalled. This is one of the best ways in which the sixth sense presents wisdom while we sleep. It is not necessary to understand the exact symbology or plot-line of a dream if we can just recognize and accept the ways that its wisdom changes us.
- 2. How might this dream balance some extreme?** Dreams have their own language, and it often seems exaggerated or overstated as if trying to make a point. Dreams are trying to push us toward balance, so if there is some strong feeling or behavior in our waking life, our dreams will evoke a strong feeling in the opposite direction. When we wake from a powerful dream, it is empowering to question if it is balancing some extreme opposite, and then to seek balance somewhere in the middle.
- 3. What might this dream be telling me about my body?** Our intuitive mind is always alert for ways to improve our physical health. There are some tip-offs to dreams which may symbolically describe or diagnose physical conditions: medical imagery, presence of doctors or drugstores, or specific health warnings. Vehicles often represent the physical body. Dreams set in dining rooms or kitchen may indicate problems in the diet. Certain themes may refer to conditions in the body: traffic may indicate intestinal blockage; running out of money may correlate to running out of energy. Looking for ways that a dream may be speaking of your physical condition may reveal key wisdom.

During those two periods of half-sleep/half-wake, when we are falling asleep and when we are awakening, there is unique opportunity for consciousness. The physical senses are not fully awake but the mind's wakeful, analytical awareness is available. It is worth making it a habit to utilize those moments during which the sixth sense is most accessible, to apply awareness and openness to insight. Try to wake up gently and naturally. As you begin to become aware of yourself in bed, pay attention to any imagery or feelings you are experiencing. Let random impressions come to your attention. Notice your mood, thoughts and ideas. By simply paying attention to any new ideas or impressions you sense, you deepen their effect. Recording these feelings, thoughts and insights in a journal, as well as your dreams, makes their information more meaningful when you review it at a later date.

To apply this positive habit in your life, try for a week to be particularly sensitive to your intuition as you sleep, and during the half-sleep periods before and after sleep. Pay special attention to dreams you may recall during your experimental week. Sometimes they are the very best example of your sixth sense and its ability to help you stay spiritually, mentally and physically centered.

### **#10 Keeping Daily Rhythms**

Dependable, positive patterns in life remind us that we live in an orderly universe. The fast-paced, hectic, unpredictability of our day can throw us off kilter, disorient us, and drain our energy. On days when we find our rhythm, we have plenty of energy and vitality. The positive habit of finding and keeping a daily rhythm allows us to handle uncertainty with grace, and become more spiritually centered.

This is a positive use of free will. Deciding what you will do, and then doing it, gives you force; it increases your energy. You probably know the feeling of choosing to do something, and then really wanting to do it, and then being energized by the very activity.

Even when the reality—the demands and responsibilities—of our lifestyle does not allow us to do what we'd really like to do, the creative use of our free will to get organized and focused can give us control enough to align our tasks with our rhythms.

Medical research shows that the body is a highly sensitive clock that moves through different states throughout the day. There are peaks and valleys of alertness, creativity, energy and so forth. Paying attention to these cycles is key, though this can be challenging since modern technology allows us to ignore natural rhythms. Start by being aware of the ebb and flow of feelings and energy. Once we are aware and comfortable with our cyclic nature, we can begin to consciously create rhythms for ourselves as a positive habit.

Everyone's rhythm is personal and unique, and subject to change. Keep your rhythm simple enough to support you without controlling you. For example, a folk adage often recommended by Cayce prescribes, "After breakfast, work a while, after lunch rest a while, and after dinner walk a mile." Adapt this or similar formula to your own lifestyle, then make a commitment to it. Creatively adjust and interpret it as conditions allow. The point is to create a reliable rhythm for your day. Try this for at least a week to experience the changes this positive habit can bring to your life. You will find the more you try this positive habit, the easier it becomes.

### **#11 The Three-Step Body Tuneup**

Most of us understand the need to take care of ourselves physically, but there are many days when we are simply too tired to give our bodies the attention they deserve. We want to be free of illness, maintain a healthy weight, and have lots of energy for the physical benefits, but a strong body is important for our spiritual lives, too. When we accept that the body is an expression of our mind and spirit, revealing deeper and unseen aspects of who we know ourselves to be, then anything we do to revitalize and enhance the body will benefit the mind and spirit, too.

Edgar Cayce's health advice includes many tips that can be incorporated into your lifestyle without huge investments of time and energy. Thurston summarizes three

simple methods to keep your body tuned which, as positive habits, require a minimal amount of time and yield significant results. The first is adequate intake of water; the second is an easy head-and-neck exercise; and the third is attentive eating during one meal per day. These are Cayce's most easily applicable set of physical recommendations for reestablishing a centered life. These are not provided as a shortcut to good health—good health results from comprehensive lifestyle choices—but as a starting point for redirecting your practices.

**Drink water.** This is the most basic dietary principle. The body requires water to assimilate nutrients and eliminate waste. The amount of water varies for each person, but six to eight glasses daily seems to be a good goal for most. This amounts to drinking a glass of water immediately upon waking, two glasses between breakfast and lunch, three more glasses during the afternoon, and two glasses in the evening. This sounds excessive but once you make this a habit, you will wonder how you previously survived with less water.

**Stretch the head and neck.** Most people can stretch, and stretching can be performed just about anywhere. Cayce frequently recommended a series of head and neck movements that go like this: "Sitting erect bend the head forward three times at least, then back as far as it may be bent three times, to the right side three times; then to the left side three times. Then circle the head and neck to the right three times, then to the left three times. Be consistent with this, though, not just doing it occasionally." The benefits of these stretching exercises include improvements in the sensory organs, especially the eyes. It takes more than a week to see these benefits from this positive habit—more like a few months—but you should see immediate benefits in the reduction of stress since tension is often stored in the neck and shoulder areas. The secret to success with this positive habit is threefold: do it slowly; do it consistently; do it purposefully.

**Eat consciously and with a thankful attitude.** Research in the last fifteen years shows that the state of a person's emotional wellness directly affects his or her physical well-being. Stress, depression, and anxiety impair the immune system, while happiness, appreciation, and inspiration strengthen it. This creates an opportunity to combine positive attitude with conscious eating practices. This is more than just eating slowly. It means avoiding eating when you are worried, fearful or angry, as well as being more conscious about the process of taking in food. Cayce advised to see the food doing what you would have it do. As a starting point for this practice, pick one meal a day and take a moment for prayer or to get in a positive frame of mind before eating.

## **#12 Wrapping Up the Day: Bedtime Imaginative Recall**

In the final two or three minutes of the day, we have a valuable opportunity for enhancing spiritual centeredness. This positive habit involves going back through the events of the day and observing the impact of your deeds, words, and thoughts--without guilt or criticism--noting lessons learned and intentions unfulfilled. This improves sleep and prepares us for the challenges of tomorrow.

Review your day in forward or reverse chronology, focusing on your interactions with others during the day, as well as any key moments that happened to you privately. In this short review of the day, we call to mind the most significant happenings, paying particular attention to the feelings and thoughts that accompanied events. Even more importantly, try to imagine what impact events had on other people. The power of this

review is in brain psychology. As we enter sleep, the brain is receptive to thoughts and themes it will process during dream-state. In dream-state, the mind tries to reconcile our experience with our ideals, most cherished values and core beliefs, and then creatively influences our choices the next day.

The positive habit that makes this bedtime review a conscious exercise at the end of the day makes it easier for us to learn the lessons of life and better cope with the new challenges that are coming the next day.

To apply this positive habit in your life, make a commitment for one week to end the day in a creative review. Once in bed and ready for sleep, recall the events of your day as an objective observer, seeing significant accomplishments, serious disagreements, stimulating opportunities, and new insights, as well as the little things that had a big impact on your inner life. Focus especially on your interactions with others during the day. For each key element, do two things: notice the thoughts and feelings associated with each key event, especially motives and purpose, and imagine how other people were effected by the events. Be alert to insights and self-knowledge that come from this end-of-day review, as well as to dreams and waking insights that may occur.

### **Conclusion**

You now know twelve habits that require very little time each day and can potentially change your life a little at a time. The key to success with these positive habits is application. The habits work only if you put attention and energy into them on a regular basis, as a way of life. Notice the common themes in the practices Thurston suggests:

1. Make a commitment to doing something daily (try it for a week).
2. Be clear about what you want to experience or achieve.
3. Attitude and intention are key.
4. Pay attention to results and changes.