

SESSION 6: The 3As – Appreciating

WELCOME

Welcome again to our course on realizing a life of love! It's good to be with you!

If you are new to this course, I strongly recommend that you review the previous sessions, because the first ten sessions make up the core foundation upon which the rest of the course is built. You'll need this foundation to benefit from the remaining sessions.

SO LET'S GET STARTED

Again, as a reminder, the 3 As of awakening are Attending, Appreciating, and Acting with love. Attending leads to appreciation, which then leads to skillful loving action. Appreciation has two meanings, however: both understanding the nature of things and understanding the value or sacredness of Reality. Both of these aspects of appreciation arise from careful attending. Together, the twin practices of Attending and Appreciating, called “Appreciative Attending,” generate wisdom and reverence, which enable us to fulfill our purpose—to nurture and savor Life. Inspired by reverence for Life, we can then take Action to benefit all of Life—others and ourselves—with a loving heart, while enjoying each brief and precious moment of existence.

Last session we discussed the practice of presence. Today we will talk about the second A of awakening, the practice of appreciating.

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APPRECIATING

Two aspects of appreciation arise out of attending. One is the wisdom aspect—seeing the nature of things, or appreciating Truth, including an understanding of oneness.

Out of this appreciation of Truth arises the second aspect, which is reverence or the appreciation of the sacred nature of your life, of all of Life, and of Reality. This is the value or heart aspect of appreciation. We can call this radical reverence in the sense that radical refers to something propound and fundamental. This reverence is absolute and unconditional, and it stands apart from our personal likes, dislikes, and judgments. Appreciating the truth of things triggers awe and wonder, which then trigger gratitude, humility, and a desire to live a life of love. Together, wisdom and reverence make up the two wings of appreciation that inspire a life of skillful loving.

We sustain our appreciation through Attending and through conscious management of our attitude. It's relatively easy to appreciate the sacred nature of all things and all people when we're still and comfortable. It's more difficult when we feel threatened or are in pain. This is where attitude management comes in.

Appreciating is the practice of accepting and honoring our painful feelings, as well as our destructive urges, even as we abstain to the best of our ability from acting on them. In the practice of Appreciating, we remind ourselves that this moment is sacred, we are sacred, everyone is sacred, and everything is sacred.

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It may seem impossible to think of pain as anything but “bad,” but pain is simply a signal that something isn’t right. If we break our leg, pain tells us not to walk on it. If someone dear to us leaves us or dies, our grief comes as a necessary part of our attachment to that person. But Appreciating opens us to accept pain as a stern but invaluable teacher.

If you look back on your own life, you’ll likely appreciate that the most painful times also provided the most growth and transformation. Many people experience what’s called “post-traumatic growth,” which provides them with wisdom, compassion, and forgiveness. Appreciating helps us befriend our pain rather than make an enemy of it.

Appreciating isn’t the same as enjoyment, however, so not seeing pain as “bad” doesn’t mean we like it. If we’re in pain, it’s still painful, even as we humbly appreciate it, but we don’t add extra suffering on top of the pain by resisting the reality of its existence. Ironically, people find that by appreciating, accepting, and embracing their pain, they resolve it faster than when they resist it.

The practice of Appreciating is also the practice of humility. We humbly see and accept the way things are, even when we’re in great pain, changing what we can and accepting the rest. In this way, Appreciating promotes serenity.

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As human beings, of course, it's difficult for us to grasp this concept of Appreciating everything, including our pain. But when we're able to understand it, we invite the sublime experience of nonjudgmental awe about Reality. We see that what is . . . simply is. Appreciating allows us to see that the Universe is neutral without judgment of anything as "bad" or "good." When we're able to see Life in this way, it frees us to experience radical reverence for all of existence—even the most painful circumstances of our lives.

The Reality of this moment is as it must and can only be. If a bear ate me while I'm backpacking in the mountains, for example, it would be sacred and perfect because it's simply Life doing Life. Again, the Universe makes no judgment of this as positive or negative. In fact, awe and nonjudgment are the two pillars of the reverence aspect of Appreciating.

You'll recognize the human relativity of judgment in the story of the young man who received a horse as a gift. At first, this was good, until he fell off the horse and broke his leg. Then, the horse was bad. When war broke out, his broken leg saved him from being drafted into the army. Then, the horse was good again.

In another example, a wildflower is good in a field until it chokes out your vegetable patch. Then, all of a sudden, it's bad.

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As we counter judgment through Appreciating, however, we must also be wary of judging our tendency to be judgmental. Nature has designed us to assign values of good or bad to things depending on how they affect us. Even after awakening, “gooding” and “badding” still happen in the mind. Appreciating this is simply a process of staying aware of what we think and feel to let go of judgments as they arise because we know the Universe is sacred—something beyond our limited view of good or bad. As we do this repeatedly, we stop being caught up in judgments and move toward living with discernment of what’s helpful or harmful rather than making judgments of good or bad. This practice frees us from hate and enables unconditional love.

But what happens when a criminal robs you? It’s natural to feel fear and anger and judge the criminal as a “bad” person. When you see the relativity and unreality of judgment, however, judgment falls away, and you simply see the robbery as a harmful act by a harmful person. There may be still anger and condemnation of the crime, but your heart remains open so that you no longer condemn the person. This is how Appreciating creates the capacity for unconditional love.

Transcending judgment to live in discernment allows us to not only see the delusion of our unlovability but also the delusion of others’ unlovability. Knowing our primordial goodness beyond good and bad, we can attend closely to our harmful urges and the evil in our hearts. We no longer need to project the “bad” parts of ourselves that we’ve disowned onto others. We can own all of who we are without closing our hearts to ourselves, and we can see the destructiveness of others while not closing our hearts to them.

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This transcendence of judgment frees us from the bonds of desire and aversion. Not that we don't still experience wanting and not wanting, but they no longer enslave us so much. We're freed to love everyone, including ourselves, more wholeheartedly, authentically, and unconditionally.

So it's possible for us to hold our pain with a sense of abiding reverence. Doing so protects our capacity to experience and express love even in adverse situations.

THE PRACTICE OF APPRECIATING

While the practice of Appreciating is simple in its essence, it requires continuous effort over our lifetime. These practices are spiritual in nature because they're like swimming against the stream of our default neurobiology. We may or may not notice immediate results, but with consistent practice, a transformation will occur.

To cultivate appreciation, practice two things: First, attend to this moment. Inquire deeply, looking closely and asking, "What is this?" and "Why is this?" Second, quietly and humbly say "yes" to this moment repeatedly, even when you're in great distress. Remind yourself, moment by moment, that "this moment is sacred." If this seems too much, you can just say, "This is as it is." Remind yourself that good and bad are relative, limited human constructs created by our emotional brain to perpetuate our survival.

You have control over your attitude, so intentionally practice appreciative acceptance of what is, even while you improve your situation and reduce your distress. This includes saying "yes" to evil, injustice, and hatred. Hate fans the flames of hate, while unconditional appreciation counters the violence of hate and judgment with love.

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Appreciating our Love Wound is central to the healing of that wound. When we attend with appreciative kindness to the scared, angry, hurt, and disenfranchised parts of ourselves, our loving awareness brings a transformative healing. Loving awareness becomes our ideal parent in a process of psychospiritual reparenting that restores our original wholeness.

When you feel judgment and pain, appreciate them, and gently allow them to dissolve in the light of your appreciative awareness. Imagine, for example, that you offend someone. The thought “I’m such an asshole” might arise along with a feeling of self-loathing. Return to the present, take note of both the pain and the judgment, and greet the pain with kind, loving awareness. Let the judgment be replaced with discernment: “my actions triggered hurt and anger.” In this practice, all painful circumstances are a path to awakening.

For many of us, our self-hatred may be so deeply conditioned that the practice of appreciative attending seems impossible. So as we’re learning to do this, it will be useful to work with someone adept at appreciative attending. This may be a loving, nonjudgmental therapist, friend, teacher, or mentor. Creating loving, connected resonance with awake, loving people can prime the pump of your loving awareness.

Of course, opening to and receiving the love of others is critical for developing our own loving awareness. We benefit from having our divine goodness mirrored back to us.

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IN OUR NEXT SESSION

In our next session, we'll explore more deeply releasing judgments and cultivating loving intent.

In the meantime, between now and then, I invite you to practice the following:

1. Continue your daily presence practice, both a period of silence, solitude and stillness in the morning, and your practice of stillness in motion throughout the day.
2. As you attend to the Now, be especially vigilant to note the arising of judgments. Also note when pain arises. Get very present in times of pain. As you see pain and judgments arise, remind yourself, “this is as it is,” or “this is sacred.” This will help for the release of mental attachments to negative judgments. Look deeply into the center of the pain with kindness and care. What is at the root of it? Look for attachments to ideas of how the mind wishes for Reality to be other than It is. Look for delusions or misbeliefs about your unlovability or someone else's unlovability. See if you can see the origin of these ideas in prior traumatic experiences. Note how when you get very present and see deeply in this way, the pain dies down.

Combining attending with appreciating is transformative. Appreciative attending cultivates loving awareness, which not only transform your consciousness, but through you the world.

Please take some time to share your reflections with your fellow members of the WellMind community and to read what others have to say as well. Let us share and support each other in our exploration of love!