

SESSION 7: Releasing Judgments and Cultivating Loving Intent

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 second A of Awakening: Appreciating. In this session, we'll dive deeper into the practice of appreciation. Specifically, we'll explore the transcendence of judgment to discernment and the cultivation of loving intent, which is the basis of loving action.

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JUDGEMENT

As I discussed in our last session, Appreciating What Is allows us to see that the Universe is neutral without judgment of anything as “bad” or “good.” As William Shakespeare said in Hamlet, “There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.”

Our minds are designed by Nature to judge. For our purposes, I distinguish judging from discerning, where judging entails forming an opinion about the value or merit of someone or something, and discerning means to see the nature of someone or something. With these definitions, discerning something is to just see it for what it is, while judging someone or something involves an assignment of value as either good, bad, or neutral.

Judging something or someone as “good” or “bad” is the way our biology helps us to discern what’s beneficial vs. what’s harmful. When something harms us, causes us discomfort, or threatens us, the brain judges it to be “bad,” and there’s a feeling tone of aversion. This can be felt as dislike, annoyance, disgust, contempt, resentment, anger, or hatred and rage in the extreme. These emotions drive us to avoid, harm, or even destroy what we judge to be “bad.”

Conversely, when something gives us pleasure, comfort, relief, or safety, the brain judges it to be “good.” When the brain determines something to be “good,” there’s a feeling tone of attraction. This can be felt as like, pleasure, relief, contentment, satisfaction, or even the feeling of intense affection. These emotions drive us in in the form of desire or even cravings to seek out and acquire or to experience the gratification of whatever the brain judges to be good. Among other things, this might be friends, lovers, material possessions, social positions of status, entertainment, food, or drugs.

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The evolution of “gooding” and “badding” and the associated emotions of desire and aversion have served us well as a species. Our emotions of desire and aversion along with our understandings of what is good and bad create our intentions, which drive our actions to promote our satisfaction, comfort, and survival. These mechanisms make up the ego, without which we wouldn’t survive.

Despite the benefits of judging, it has its downside. Specifically, it’s a barrier to loving. Why? Because love is reverence-inspired beneficial action. As humans, we’re simply not wired to have reverence for something we judge to be bad or neutral. It’s difficult to love someone you hate. In fact, judging others to be bad or irrelevant leads to apathy, exploitation, and violence, including war, oppression, and genocide.

Because of our interdependence, our species is now at an evolutionary crisis in which we must transition from judging to discernment. We must transition from “good” and “bad” to “helpful” and “harmful.” We can’t afford to make each other “bad” anymore. This leads to “othering” people, dehumanizing them and then disregarding, rejecting, harming, or even killing them. Because of this, think of judging as a psychological act of violence that can lead to actual violence.

We live in a psychologically violent, judging society. We judge each other all the time. We place people on social hierarchies of value and worth, such as who is the brightest, the most athletic, the most attractive, the most talented, or the most charming, to name just a few hierarchies. If you attend closely within, you’ll see that not only does judging cripple your ability to love others, it’s also the source of your Love Wound or your sense of your own unlovability.

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Reflect on your own life and how you may or may not have measured up on these different social hierarchies. Since most of us can't help but buy into these judgmental hierarchies to some degree, our place on the social status ladder can wound our sense that we're good enough and have enough. There's always someone better than us who has more than we have. Conversely, seeing ourselves as better than others cultivates arrogance, which also damages our capacity to love.

Unless we had particularly enlightened parents, we were also wounded by the judgments of our parents or caregivers growing up when they told us we were either "good" or "bad" based on our behavior. If we were neglected or abused, we also absorbed and took on the judgment that we were "bad." Since we were wired with judging brains, our brains soaked up the judgments of our caregivers, or we formed the judgment that we were bad because of the way we were treated. In essence, we believed the negativity we received.

So judgment is at the root of the Love Wound. We're left with a global felt sense that we're somehow not good enough or that we don't have enough. Our self-judgments and the judgments of others leave us feeling unlovable. Judgment robs us of our existential value and damages the reverence that's the root of love.

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Fortunately, there is an antidote to the poison of judgment. It's loving awareness developed through the practice of appreciative attending. Attending is the first and most important part of this practice. Through Attending, we see both judgments and the unreality of judgments. We see that "good" and "bad" are relative to what we perceive as beneficial to us or harmful to us. When we see this, combined with appreciation, our capacity for judgment morphs into discernment. Why? Because in discernment, we grasp the harmful or helpful nature of someone or something without making it good or bad. We see that good and bad are relative, not the absolute. We see that on an absolute level, everything and everyone are as they are, free of value judgments. Everyone and everything are sacred, and they are as they must and can only be in this moment.

Of course, the brain still judges; that's what brains do. It generally takes time and practice to transcend our biology of desire and craving. But with our cultivation of loving awareness, we see judgments as they arise and dissipate in the light of our awareness. We don't judge the judging, but let judgments come and fall away.

So this is the practice. The other day, I remembered a time many years ago when I rushed to take a parking spot before someone else got it. I felt a surge of self-judgment and the thought arose, "I'm such an asshole." In the light of my awareness, this quickly morphed into "that was a selfish thing to do." The toxic self-hatred fell away, leaving me with discernment of how unloving my behavior was.

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INTENTION

So now, let's turn our attention to intention.

Intention is key to realizing a life of love. If you attend closely to your intentions, you'll see that they shape your life. If you set an intention at the beginning of your day to love yourself and others in all you do—to master the art of loving—then your intention will take you in the direction of love. Setting an intention in this way is like setting the compass for one's heart.

To do this, you must purify your intentions. Look closely within. What are your intentions? We all have the intentions of feeling good and not feeling bad. Those intentions are universal. But what are your strategies for feeling good and not feeling bad? Let's shine a light on these intentions.

We all want to feel safe and comfortable. We all want to have the gratification of pleasurable experiences. We also want to belong and be loved. These things are universal. If you look closely at your intentions, you'll see that you have intentions to be safe, comfortable, gratified, and to be loved. These can lead to ego-based intentions to accumulate possessions, pleasurable experiences, achievements, a good reputation with others, or social status, praise, and affection.

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What's very important for the practice of love is to look closely at the intention to heal our Love Wound through achievement or people-pleasing, or the intention to numb the pain of our Love Wound with pleasure and distraction. What's more subtle is the intention to feel lovable by loving others. Look carefully and honestly within yourself. Do you notice intentions to achieve, please others, numb or distract yourself from your pain, or love others so that you can feel more lovable? If you look carefully and honestly, you'll see these ego-based intentions. They are universal and just part of being human.

These intentions are very tricky and can poison our practice of love. Intentions to protect and promote our vitality are loving and wholesome. The intention to love for the fulfillment of loving is also wholesome. But the intention to love in order to heal our Love Wound or to gain status or praise is not wholesome, because then our sense of our lovability isn't experienced as an absolute given. Instead, it's dependent on the love, praise, and recognition of others. This is an error because your goodness and worth—your lovability—is unconditional, apart from how good or loving you are.

In all the great spiritual traditions, the process of awakening is understood to require a purification of intent. Specifically, we must set an intention to love for love's sake alone. Renunciation is required to purify our intention. To master the art of loving, we must renounce intentions to seek fulfillment through ego gratifications such as power, material wealth, pleasure, or social status. Most importantly, we must renounce the intention of doing anything to feel more lovable. This includes ego-based strategies to achieve or to please others. We must also renounce any ego-strategies to numb the Love Wound, including the use of drugs or engaging in distractions. Instead, our intention must be only to love for love's sake alone.

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This includes loving ourselves and loving others. As part of loving ourselves, we can have the intention of gratifying ego needs to savor this gift of life and secure our vitality, but we must do so clear-eyed, not confusing gratification with fulfillment.

For the practice of loving, I suggest consciously setting an intention at the end of your morning stillness practice to love by practicing the 3 As of awakening throughout your day. You can set an intention to be a channel for the life force of love to flow through you into the world. Set an intention to live your life to serve, contribute, nurture, and benefit both yourself and others. Set an intention to live each day for something greater than yourself. Set an intention to ground yourself in your innate and unconditional goodness and to live from a place of wholeness. Set an intention each day to tend to your Love Wound with care, self-nurturing, and self-compassion.

Regarding the 3 As, set an intention to attend and practice presence throughout the day. Set an intention to be a kind, curious investigator, especially when you experience pain. Regarding appreciation, set an intention to say “Yes” and to honor What Is. Set an intention to collaborate harmoniously with Reality and to let go of negativity and judgments as they come up. This means setting an intention to let go of clinging to what is not and to let go of saying “no” to What Is. Set an intention to honor pain and trouble, and let them teach you what you need to learn. Set an intention to see the sacred in all things and all people and to treat each encounter with another person as something holy. Set an intention to benefit yourself and others in all you say and do. Set an intention to be kind, caring, compassionate, patient, affirming, nurturing, and helpful. In short, set an intention to be loving.

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Begin each day with a visualization of being your ideal you, living your ideal life. Start each day making a strong and deep commitment to living your vision of a life of love. Believe deeply in yourself and in your capacity to live your ideal life. As Wayne Dyer says, “You’ll see it when you believe it.” Intention is key in this. Actively remind and reassure yourself that no matter your past trauma and mistakes, no matter your current difficulties, you can still engage in the practice of love day by day, moment by moment.

Regarding your Love Wound, set an intention to renounce any attempts to feel lovable through anything external to you. This includes seeking to feel lovable through the practice of love or through doing anything to gain the praise, recognition, and affection of others. Be very deliberate and purposeful about this. Set an intention to note any feelings of unworthiness, self-hatred, emptiness, or brokenness as being real but not true. Set an intention to be very, very present when the pain of the Love Wound arises, so that you can see it but not be it. Set an intention to greet your inner pain with kindness, care, compassion, and curiosity.

In living a life of love, our greatest challenge is judging, as judgment poisons love and fuels hatred. Set an intention each day to transcend judgments of good and bad, living instead in discernment of what is harmful and what is beneficial. As you allow for judgments to fall away in the light of your appreciative awareness, your reverence for life will grow, and you’ll be enabled and inspired to love.

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IN OUR NEXT SESSION

In our next session, we'll discuss the third A of Awakening to Love: Acting with love.

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

1. Continue your daily presence practice with a period of silence, solitude, and stillness in the morning and with your practice of stillness in motion throughout the day.
2. Craft a prayer of intention for yourself to say at the beginning of each day. Here's an example of an intention to love that I crafted based on the prayer of St. Francis:

A Dedication to Love

May I be a channel of love,
May I heal hatred with love,
Harm with forgiveness,
Doubt with faith,
Despair with hope,
Darkness with light,
Sadness with joy.
May I seek more
To console than to be consoled,
To understand than to be understood,
To love than to be loved.
For I know that in giving, we receive.
In forgiving, we are forgiven.
And in transcending self we realize our greatest joy.

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

3. Make it your life intention to practice the 3 As of awakening, day by day, moment by moment. Remind and reassure yourself that with this practice today, every day can be a day of love.

4. Renounce any attempts to heal or numb the love wound through the various ego strategies. These include achievement, people pleasing, using drugs or engaging in distractions. Instead, set an intention to restore your sense of your innate goodness through the various stillness and heart practices we are learning, as well as by showing yourself kindness, nurturance, self-compassion, and self-forgiveness.

5. Make a special point to be on the lookout for judgments as they arise throughout the day. Be vigilant about this. For fun, you could even keep a little "judgment notebook" to note your judgments of self and others. When you do have a judgment, replace any ideas of "good" or "bad" with an understanding of "beneficial" or "harmful." Make it your intention to live a judgment-free life.

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!