

SESSION 9: Practice

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 Acting with love and reviewed the 31 practices that make up the practice of love.

In this session, we'll talk more about the art of loving. This includes the elements of **skillful practice and positive habit changes**. By the end of our session today, you should feel enabled and inspired in your practice of the art of loving!

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Loving is a skill we hopefully begin to learn from our caregivers when we're young. But if we weren't taught well, all is not lost. The most wonderful thing—and the reason we are all together—is that we can learn to love well. All we need is practice. Then, behaviors that were uncomfortable or awkward become more automatic.

Becoming more loving is about change, but it doesn't just happen. **Learning to love well requires intentional effort.** The most important thing we need, however, is just the willingness to engage in the practice of loving.

I'll give you **an example of a love practice.** Do you have difficulty asking for help or being vulnerable? Many people find it very difficult to reach out and share their vulnerability with others because their parents weren't able to respond to their needs when they were children. To overcome this, I often ask my patients to do a connection drill every day, and I try to practice this drill every day myself. The practice is to tell at least one person every day everything that's happening to you and everything you're thinking, feeling, and doing in response to those events. This is the practice of connecting. It's especially important to do this when we're hurting. We practice the rule, "Never hurt alone." This is a critical love skill.

But before we talk about what to practice, let's talk about how to practice. If you study people who become masters at what they do, you can learn something about how to practice the art of loving.

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First, we need a **strong motivation to practice**—to do the work of loving because loving takes grit, which means the capacity to keep at something and see it through. Passion, hope, and faith help sustain our motivation to love and persist. You can build your passion about loving by reflecting on the many benefits of love we talked about in session one. You can boost your hope and faith by looking around and noting how others have realized lives of love despite their histories of trauma, neglect, and abuse. This should help you fall in love with loving.

You can also fortify your hope and motivation by not buying into an identity of being a failure just because you've failed in the past. Instead, we need to invest in repeated failures as the path to mastery. This allows us to learn from our mistakes and not give up.

And when we do mess up—which we'll do over and over for the rest of our lives—we need to be very kind and patient with ourselves, just as we practice being kind and patient with others. People who beat themselves up don't master a skill as well as those who are kind to themselves.

The practice of loving, like anything of great value, requires effort. There are no easy shortcuts to excellence. Laziness is the enemy of the mastery of any art. So counter laziness by committing to a consistent effort over a lifetime. Remind yourself that growth comes at the cost of comfort and safety.

One reason people struggle to develop loving relationships is because they tend to do what's familiar and comfortable rather than what's best for them, which may be unfamiliar and uncomfortable. We must get comfortable with being a little uncomfortable at times. Keep reminding yourself that long-term gain sometimes requires short-term pain.

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It's said that **successful people schedule their practices and their priorities**. So we need to make loving our first priority and schedule time to practice. For the art of loving, we need to practice cultivating reverence. So schedule your morning stillness and reverence practices, even if you just begin with five minutes a day. You also need to schedule time to take care of yourself and give of yourself to the people in your life. Practicing loving takes time, so schedule the time to practice.

With the practice of any art, **consistency is key**. Anything of worth requires a certain degree of discipline to stick with it day by day. Although you'll have off days, commit to not taking a day off from the practice of loving.

Yet, don't expect to see dramatic changes every day. Progress isn't linear, nor is it usually perceptible from day to day. Often, when we're developing a skill, we can't see the changes going on within us. One way to think about this is the way footsteps wear down stone steps over many years. You don't see any change when one person walks up the steps. But you do see change over many years. The gradual process of awakening to the Sacred oneness of all things can be like that. So can the other love practices.

Another key practice principle is to **focus your efforts on what you need to improve**. It's human to do what we're good at and avoid what we aren't as good at. In practicing the art of loving, however, we want to do the opposite. I, for example, feel I'm pretty good at generosity. I'm not as good at consideration due to the tendency of my mind to become self-preoccupied. So being considerate of others is something I focus more on than generosity. So reflect on the different love skills, identify the ones that need the most work, and focus on practicing those.

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Another way to think about effective practice is to intensely focus on one aspect of loving at a time. We learn complex skills by breaking them down into small parts. The 31 different love practices allow for this. You might, for example, take one week to focus on being as helpful to as many people as possible. The next week, you might focus on collaborating and so on. Going deep into one practice at a time promotes more skill in each.

Two more secrets of effective practice are **deliberation and intentionality**. This means practicing the art of loving consciously, deliberately, and on purpose. It means starting each day with an intention to love, as we've talked about before.

I think of loving as something we devote our lives to. Every day is about the worshipful practice of loving. I recommend you start the day with a dedication to love like the one I've shared with you. Say it to yourself aloud or silently one or more times as part of your morning reverence and stillness practice. Then, go about your day with a deliberate intention to see the Sacred in all things and all people and to love in all you say and do.

You can also **boost your practice of loving with visualization**. At the beginning of each day, reflect on your plans. Then, visualize yourself benefitting others and yourself that day. Visualize yourself managing any challenging interactions you might have with loving intent and action. You can do this in just a few minutes.

The last general practice tip I'll mention is to **recruit support and accountability**. No one does anything great without the support and guidance of others. This is part of loving. So share your practice with trusted confidants. Tell them what you're doing, and ask for their support.

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Now that we've gone over some tips on how to practice, let's talk about *what* to practice.

In short, what we practice are the **three As of awakening to love**. This starts with the practice of appreciative attending so that we can cultivate loving awareness. We practice looking closely at our internal and external experience with kind curiosity. We practice being open, observant, and objective, noting thoughts and feelings as products of the mind. This is the practice of presence as we attend to the Now. We start this practice in silence, solitude, and stillness at the beginning of the day. Then, we carry this still presence into the movement of our days, returning to presence over and over and over.

We then combine attending with appreciation. This is the practice of an attitude of reverence for What Is, including the tedious and painful. As I just mentioned, this cultivates loving awareness.

As we've already discussed, a key practice is to be vigilant for the arising of judgments and to let them fall away and transform into discernment. This is a key part of the practice of appreciation as we transcend the brain's default "gooding" and "badding."

Finally, there's the practice of the third A, acting with love, as specified in the 31 love practices. As we develop our experience of our own lovability and the lovability of others, we embark on the practice of acting to benefit ourselves and others. We take on the role of being our own ideal loving parent and taking very good care of ourselves. This includes asking for help and borrowing the love and support of others as we practice loving and supporting ourselves.

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Then, we go through our day loving others as we're called to do. In this practice, we realize the great fulfillment of loving.

Another part of the practice of love is the purification of intent, or the renunciation of unwholesome intentions. There are two intentions in particular that we must renounce. One is to secure a sense of our lovability through the praise, admiration, or affection of others, as this simply doesn't work. We instead commit to the reality of our innate goodness and take responsibility for doing the internal heart-mind work to tap into this reality. No one can heal our Love Wound for us. This is our work with the love, support, and guidance of others.

Second, we renounce seeking fulfillment through ego gratifications such as money, possessions, status, or power. In doing this, we see the difference between gratification and fulfillment clearly. We see gratification as just that. And we understand that fulfillment arises out of our realization of a life of love in which we experience meaning, purpose, and oneness through the practice of loving.

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IN OUR NEXT SESSION

In our next session, we're going to talk about the first and perhaps the most important of all the love practices—abstaining from harm. Abstaining is so important that I originally conceived of it as one of 4 As of awakening.

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. Start your day with a morning intention to love. You might want to recite a daily intention in the form of a prayer.
3. Inquire deeply into your experience with a kind, curious eye, especially if you're in pain. Ask “what is this?” and affirm, “this is sacred.” Continue to let go of judgments as they arise.
4. Review your day. How are you scheduling practice time? How will you nurture your practice of loving?

As always, 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! Your contributions are essential!