

SESSION 10: Abstaining

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.

In this session, we'll talk about the first and perhaps most important of all the love practices, abstaining from harm. First let's talk about what exactly is abstaining?

To abstain is to **choose not to do or have something**. For the practice of love, abstaining refers to the practice of choosing not to do something harmful despite impulses to do otherwise.

SESSION 10: Abstaining

It's the practice of self-restraint. Out of our reverence for Life, we make a vow to abstain from harmful behaviors, including both harmful words and actions. What do we abstain from? Examples include killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, physical violence, addicting, gossiping, judging others, addicting, the self-centered manipulation of others, or the exploitation of others.

Abstaining also involves renouncing gratifying behaviors or substances that cause harm. People in true recovery renounce addicting, for example, out of their awareness that temporary gratification or relief produces long-term pain. Similarly, it can feel good to judge others or gossip about others, yet we renounce engaging in these behaviors out of our commitment to not harm others.

Abstaining includes avoiding unnecessary, harmful, and unproductive speech. When you're adept at abstaining, you'll speak only when what you have to say is true, necessary, and improves the situation. Sometimes, abstaining involves withholding or tempering the truth. This is because telling the truth without compassion can be a weapon that causes great harm.

Wise people will also abstain from speaking so that they might spend more time listening. When we listen, we learn. When we speak, we often say only what we know. The wisest person is often the most silent.

In relationships, we abstain from engaging in unhealthy dependencies. This includes not depending on others to do what we can do ourselves and not allowing others to depend on us for what they can do for themselves. We should abstain from engaging in any relationship that causes harm for ourselves or others.

SESSION 10: Abstaining

Spiritually, we abstain from needing Reality to be other than exactly what it is. We let go of grasping and aversion. Abstaining from non-acceptance or an attitude of non-appreciation is also very good for us because it erases suffering. We let go of the need for other people to be other than exactly who they are, as attempting to control others is both unloving and disrespectful (with some exceptions in extreme or life-threatening circumstances). When we abstain from this behavior, we're more loving to others, as well as ourselves.

Another act of spiritual abstention is renouncing the need for anyone to love us. Instead, we take on the duty to love ourselves, sustained by the practice of stillness, from which the attitude of love arises within us and from beyond us. When we abstain from needing others to love us, we set ourselves free to love freely for love's sake alone. We also free others from any obligation to feel or act other than how they genuinely feel.

Yet another example of spiritual abstention is the **renunciation of seeking happiness through gratification**. While gratifying desires and alleviating pain are often essential to our survival and well-being, sensual gratification is just that—no more, no less. Pleasure is wonderful, but it isn't happiness. Instead, we seek happiness and meaning through the joyful fulfillment of the practice of love.

Abstaining can be thought of as a form of action, for to not act is also to act. It can take an effort of will and self-discipline, however, especially when the impulse to act in unproductive or harmful ways is strong. It takes effort when we experience fear, anger, or intense desire, coupled with a strong compulsion to act in a way that we believe would relieve these feelings. This is why abstaining can be challenging when we're emotionally aroused.

SESSION 10: Abstaining

Now let's talk about the **benefits of abstaining**.

We live in an interdependent web of Life, and we are part of that web. The fundamental truth is that when we harm Life, particularly others, we harm ourselves. Abstaining from harming others reduces the harm we experience from others.

In my opinion, Karma exists. If you put bad out into the world, bad will come back to you. People won't retaliate against you if you've done nothing to trigger retaliation. Instead, if you abstain from harming others in all that you say and do, people will come to trust you. Then, you'll be more likely to experience the benefits of their trust in the form of good will and collaboration.

Obviously, when we harm ourselves, we multiply our pain, so the benefits of abstaining from destructive speech and behaviors are enormous. Life is difficult enough without engaging in self-destructive behaviors that make life even more difficult for us. When we addict, for example, we experience the pain of cravings and compulsions. We also experience the traumatic consequences of addicting, such as lost jobs and broken relationships.

Another way that we harm ourselves is by putting ourselves in destructive or dangerous situations. We do this most often by engaging in damaging relationships with people who are hurtful to us. When we abstain from engaging in these kinds of relationships, we protect ourselves from harm.

The same can be said about abstaining from putting ourselves in abusive, hostile, or stressful work environments or other adverse or risky situations. Part of caring for and protecting ourselves involves abstaining from placing ourselves in these environments despite whatever temptations there might be.

SESSION 10: Abstaining

While loving entails doing the next right thing, part of loving—abstaining—entails not doing the next wrong thing. If you abstain from doing anything regrettable, you'll avoid the pain of regret. When we act destructively, the emotions of guilt and shame poison our consciousness. Living a virtuous life by abstaining from harm goes a long way toward reducing guilt and shame, while it builds our self-esteem as we do only esteemable acts.

Abstaining enhances vitality and joy. When we abstain from acting destructively, we create the conditions to go about nurturing Life so that our lives and the lives of others can flourish.

I'd like to now teach you a technique for the practice of abstaining.

You can develop your capacity to abstain, even if you're impulsive or experience strong compulsions that are difficult to resist. *The key is practice.*

What do you practice? You practice the “4P’s” of abstaining, They are: **presencing, pausing, processing, and proceeding.**

Presencing. The first and most important abstinence practice is presencing, or paying attention to the Now, particularly to distressing emotions and compulsions. Abstaining starts with awareness, and Presence is part of the daily practice of mindfulness or “stillness in motion.”

If you aren't mindful of what you feel or of your urges, you'll find yourself impulsively acting on your urges before giving yourself a chance to reflect. You'll react impulsively before you have a chance to respond intelligently. When people talk about doing things without thinking, they're talking about two things: not noting what they're feeling and not considering the most skillful way to respond.

SESSION 10: Abstaining

Acting without thinking starts with acting without awareness. Mindfulness, on the other hand, allows you to recognize your feelings and urges the moment they arise. You also note body sensations, what you hear, and the thoughts that arise in Awareness.

Presence is a powerful protector against impulsive reactivity. When you get very present, you tap into who you really are beneath the stirrings of your ego. You retrieve Awareness from Its immersion in thoughts, feelings, and external sensations. You then experience yourself as the “Deeper I” of Awareness below the distressing surface ripples of ego consciousness. In presence, you ground yourself in an abiding sense of peace and freedom.

The practice of presence enables you to calmly be with and reflect upon your conscious experience, and it enables you to tap into a deep reservoir of intelligence and wisdom to help you act more skillfully with love for all. You’ll see this for yourself as you experience presence.

Practice noting the emotions and urges that come up in your consciousness, especially if they’re borne of distress. Get very still, and be present. If there’s anger, note “anger.” If there’s frustration, note “frustration.” If there’s judgment, note “judgment.” If there’s an urge to act, note “urge to do ‘X.’” Once you’re aware that you’re emotionally aroused, you can take note. This then enables you to engage in the second practice, which is to pause to reflect.

Pausing. Pause to reflect whenever you note that you’re emotionally aroused or you’re experiencing an urge to act out of anger, fear, or distress. Take several long, deep breaths if you can.

SESSION 10: Abstaining

Resist acting reflexively on urges. Stop what you're doing for a moment, and don't say or do anything, if possible. If you're engaged in a heated discussion, you might politely excuse yourself for a moment. If you're on the phone, put the person on hold. If you're being triggered, remove yourself from the situation to give yourself space and time to reflect. Thinking things through takes time, anywhere from several seconds to several days or even months. Practice stopping so that you can give yourself the time you need to process. You will pause and abstain from acting until you've achieved clarity as to the best course of action, if any, for all involved.

Abstaining from any action is usually the best course of action when you're distressed. The exception might be in life-threatening situations where you must act swiftly. But these situations are rare.

Processing. Now that you've paused, take whatever time you need for reflection and inquiry. In your practice of presence, note carefully all sense experiences, including thoughts, beliefs, and understandings. Hold these both lightly and tentatively so that they might evolve in the light of your inquiry.

Ask yourself, "What is this?" If you're in distress, inquire into the roots of your distress. If you feel an urge to get high, for example, ask yourself what's blocking your experience of joy, which would remove the need to change what is. You might experience non-acceptance and note the need for a change in your attitude to one of appreciation. Or you might note some other distress that needs your attention.

Notice whether you experience that your safety, comfort, or status is threatened. If there's distress, ask yourself why. Keep asking until you get to the root fear, which is usually a fear of death, discomfort, or loss of autonomy.

SESSION 10: Abstaining

If someone criticizes you in front of others, for example, note any feelings of embarrassment, hurt, or anger. Then, inquire within. Why are you embarrassed, hurt, or angry? Because others will think less of you? Then, ask what will happen if others think less of you? Perhaps you fear you'll be alone in the world. Then, there might be a fear of loneliness or the pain of rejection. Beyond this may be the underlying fear that you'll die because there's no one to help you get by. Or perhaps there's the unrealistic feeling that you're unworthy and unwhole if you aren't perfect.

By asking “why” again and again, layer beyond layer, you'll see that your ego reactivity is usually out of proportion with Reality. While your ego may take a simple criticism as the end of the world, rarely is that the case. Inquiry allows you to put things in a more realistic perspective and soothe your egoic fears. Your understanding of your vulnerabilities will also invite compassion for yourself.

It's part of our default neurobiology to hurt someone back when they hurt us. Hurt people often hurt others. So be very mindful when you feel hurt. If someone has upset you, ask, “Can you help me understand?” (Of course, asking this isn't always possible.) You can be sure that the other person's behavior has been driven by their own pain, concerns, lack of awareness of the impact of their behavior on you, or lack of concern for their impact on you. If you can develop an understanding of their awareness, beliefs, and motives, you'll begin to feel compassion for them, even if you experience them as uncaring, hurtful, or disappointing. This will help you abstain from reacting in a hurtful way.

SESSION 10: Abstaining

Your understanding will also help you see that **everyone is doing the best they can**, that some people are disabled, and that some people are sick in hurtful and destructive ways. With clarity, you can respond in ways that are loving to you and others rather than reacting in hurtful ways. You may set limits, enforce boundaries, and do things to protect yourself, but with love and compassion for all.

Notice any expectations you've had of others that they haven't met. When your expectations don't align with Reality, you suffer. When you see this, adjust your expectations to be in alignment with Reality, even as you might work toward improving the situation. Let go of needing people or situations to be other than exactly what they are.

Seek out the counsel of **people who are both wise and safe**. Talk out your cravings and dilemmas. Abstain, however, from using others as sounding boards to vent self-righteous indignation. Practice telling at least one person every day what you're thinking, feeling, and doing. This practice of "getting current" with others not only helps you gain their invaluable perspective, but it also creates a loving matrix of accountability to protect you from getting swept away by your emotions. Take care, however, to process any advice you receive through your own conscious and rational intuition, avoiding action that doesn't feel right in your gut.

When talking out cravings, discuss the good things that will happen if you abstain and the bad things that will happen if you don't. When you talk out the consequences, you put your frontal lobes back in charge. The same goes for any urges to act destructively.

SESSION 10: Abstaining

Meditation or prayer can also help. When you pray, you might simply ask, “please help,” or ask for clarity. Often disengaging from thinking through meditation allows for deeper insights to arise from the wisdom of stillness. Many people find it helpful to sleep on a dilemma or write in a journal. Try writing spontaneously whatever comes to mind. You may be surprised by what comes out of your pen. You can also practice asking yourself what a wise person would do in your situation, which allows you to tap into your own well of wisdom.

Brainstorm the pros and cons of as many alternatives as possible. Be creative and flexible in your thinking. If at all possible, don’t act until you achieve clarity and feel, to the best of your ability, that your choice is the right one. Remember that what’s best for you is also best for others, and what’s best for others is also best for you. This is what love would do.

As you look for win-win solutions, however, don’t seek to shield others from necessary pain. If, for example, you decide to abstain from engaging in a relationship with someone who is harmful to you, know that despite any pain this may trigger in them, it’s best for them as well. Taking good care of yourself is good for everyone.

Proceeding. After presencing, pausing, and processing, proceed to live your life, moment-by-moment, asking yourself what this moment calls for. Once you process a destructive impulse and have abstained from acting, you may find that no further action is needed. Sometimes, the best thing to do is to simply let go and let be. This practice cultivates equanimity.

SESSION 10: Abstaining

Other times, forceful action may be called for, such as when you must act to protect yourself or others from harm. When you act to prevent harm, make sure your intention is for love and not against evil. Acting *against* someone creates opposition. Acting *for* something good does not.

Proceeding with what's best may not be easy. It may take courage and effort. Acting with love isn't always doing what feels good or comfortable. This is where the practice of love comes in, as most of us aren't enlightened saints. If you've processed destructive impulses adequately, however, proceeding to do the next right thing will not feel too effortful. The feeling of effortless flow will develop with practice and spiritual growth.

Practice the 4-Ps daily whenever emotionally aroused by distress or destructive urges. Be patient with yourself, as abstaining from harm takes practice. But when you stop causing harm to yourself or others, you will have created a solid foundation for realizing joy through the practice of love.

SESSION 10: Abstaining

IN OUR NEXT SESSION

In our next session, we will begin a three-week series on compassion, beginning with self-compassion. Since the practice of love starts with loving ourselves, we need to begin by attending to our own pain and suffering—including the pain of the Love Wound—with great compassion.

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 as in the dedication to love prayer we have been using at the end of our sessions.
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. Pick one harmful or potentially harmful behavior you would like to abstain from. Develop a plan for abstaining using the 4 P's

Please take some time after our session today 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!