

SESSION 13: Compassion

WELCOME

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

If you're new to this course, I strongly recommend that you review the first ten sessions because they make up the core foundation. You'll need this 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 our last session, we discussed practices for developing self-compassion. Now we can turn our attention to compassion for others, using our self-compassion as our foundation for extending compassion to others.

What is Compassion?

The Dalai Lama says, "If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion."

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Compassion is an action we take to relieve the suffering of another person. It starts with an intention to help, followed by actions to help. To have compassion, however, you must first have empathy. You must know the suffering of another. One meaning of compassion is to “suffer with.”

You can think of **compassion as having four components**. **The first is to be aware that there is suffering.** We enhance our awareness through our practice of attending. **The second is to be emotionally moved by the suffering.** **The third is wishing there to be relief from that suffering,** and **the fourth is to be willing to take action to relieve that suffering.**

Compassion can be as simple as consoling someone. You might just say, “I’m sorry you’re going through such a tough time.” It may mean just being with someone in their pain, so they don’t have to hurt alone. It might mean feeding someone who’s hungry or giving an unemployed friend a place to live while they get back on their feet.

Compassion is kindness, so it’s the opposite of cruelty. When you’re compassionate, you don’t harm others. You aren’t violent or hurtful, either physically or verbally. If you do harm someone, compassion leads you to make amends and heal the harm you caused.

Sometimes, compassion can involve self-sacrifice. If a child is crying through the night, you might stay up all night consoling them. You may give up doing something fun for yourself to visit a friend in the hospital. In the extreme, compassionate people may give their lives to benefit others, such as a father who pushes his child out of the way of an oncoming car, only to be hit by the car himself. Another example is a soldier who sacrifices his own life to save the lives of his fellow soldiers. In general, though, skillfully compassionate people don’t sacrifice their well-being so much that they harm their own vitality. As a rule, you must *be* good to *do* good.

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Benefits of Compassion

Compassion is good for everyone. Compassion enhances happiness, self-esteem, and creates a profound connection with others. It feels good to ease the suffering of others, and it makes life meaningful and fulfilling. When we act with compassion, we feel less empty, more connected, and more loving.

When our self-compassion helps us forgive and radically accept ourselves with all our mistakes, imperfections, and flaws, we can also more easily forgive others and take their perspective. What applies to us applies to others. Just as we are sacred, imperfect beings with streaks of destructiveness, so are others. Just as we forgive and accept ourselves while lovingly holding ourselves accountable for our actions, so we forgive and accept others while lovingly holding them accountable for their actions. Our tolerance and even reverence for ourselves extends to others, leading to less burnout and compassion fatigue, as well as more satisfaction when we care for others.

Barriers to Compassion

Now let's discuss briefly some of the barriers to compassion. **The main barrier to compassion is the lack of reverence for life and the lack of an attitude of love.** This can come out as indifference to the suffering of others or even as cruelty to ourselves and others.

Without reverence, we engage in self-indulgence, doing what feels good in the moment regardless of what's best in the long run for us or anyone else. This leads many people into the pits of depression and addiction.

Lack of reverence can also come out as hatred, either for others or for us. Often, it's for both. The world is filled with too many traumatized people who hate themselves and others.

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Another barrier to compassion is a lack of humble acceptance of Reality as It is. When life isn't to our liking, we may respond with anger, unkindness, and cruelty. Many people who lack reverence lead bitter, angry lives, disabled in their capacity to be compassionate either to themselves or others.

A lack of wisdom or skill is another barrier to compassion. We may have an intention to help others without knowing how. We see this all the time when good-hearted people give beggars money, which these unfortunate people then use to buy drugs and alcohol. Giving in this instance is not compassionate. Another example is giving advice. Sometimes, advice can be helpful, but it can also be disrespectful of the autonomy of others.

Another example is when we do for others what they should do for themselves. Then, we inadvertently encourage their dependency. With addiction, for example, if we protect people from the harmful consequences of their behavior, we can deprive them of the pain they need to motivate change.

Developing Compassion

So now let's talk about how to develop our compassion. As with all the love practices, we need to **develop reverence for ourselves and others** to inspire our compassionate action. We must wake up and see the sacred nature of all things and all people.

One way to inspire your reverence is by surrounding yourself with loving people. **Let others who love you for who you are teach you how to love yourself**, to tap into your own innate lovability. This facilitates self-compassion, which then enables and inspires us to show compassion to others.

We also need other people's support to face and embrace the tremendous suffering of the world. This is something no one can do alone.

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You can seek support through our WellMind community. Some people also get support from religious communities. And then there is the support of your loving friends and family.

Another way to develop reverence is **the practice of kind awareness**. One way we cultivate this kind awareness is by starting our day in stillness and tapping into stillness throughout the day. We practice appreciative attending to this miracle of existence.

Just like self-compassion, developing compassion requires an intentional daily practice until it changes your brain and becomes a way of life and a way of being. **Start each day with an intention to be unconditionally kind to everyone and to do at least one good deed for someone else every day.** Send a note, text, or email. Make a phone call. Make a list of people in your life and check up on them regularly. Invest yourself in the welfare of those around you. If there are people in need, do what you can to help them. Practice lovingkindness throughout the day. Do things to make others feel better by smiling, being kind, affirming them, helping them, and offering hope.

Since compassion requires empathy, **strive to get out of the default habit of just thinking about yourself and your concerns.** Empathy is an active practice of inquiry into what others are feeling and thinking, so make an intentional effort to think about the people you know in your life. Put yourself in their shoes. Actively imagine their suffering. Be attentive to those around you and look for nonverbal signs of distress. Then, ask people how they're doing. Listen generously and deeply with a silent mind, attending fully to both what they say and to their nonverbal communication. **Be fully present.** It's profoundly healing when someone knows you understand their experience. Often, this is enough to lessen their suffering.

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There is so much suffering in the world that the thought of tuning into this suffering may seem overwhelming. When we really tune into and empathize with another person's suffering, we can experience "empathic distress" or "empathy fatigue." It takes an intentional act of will to not turn away from another person's suffering. Appreciative attending can help to bolster your equanimity in the face of intense suffering. In this practice, we acknowledge that all that is, is as it must and can only be at this moment; We humbly acknowledge that there is a hidden perfection underlying the apparent imperfections of tragedy, illness, pain, and injustice. Having faith in the understanding that Reality is unconditionally sacred exactly as It is can help us to bear our empathic distress. As we cultivate our radical reverence, we become more capable of holding the pain of the world in our hearts.

Self-compassion also plays a large role in our capacity to manage empathic distress. When we feel distress at the suffering of another, we can offer both ourselves and the other person our compassion at the same time. This is another reason why it is so important to develop our self-compassion to enhance our ability to show others compassion.

You can also bolster your compassion by contemplating the interdependence we all have upon one another, including the 10,000 ways in which the efforts of others benefit your life and the 10,000 conditions and circumstances that sustain your life and well-being. If you can tap into the oneness underlying our interdependence, compassion for the suffering of those who are a part of the One Life of which you are also a part will naturally arise.

Wish everyone well—both those you like and those you don't. If you feel hatred or animosity, engage in the practice of forgiveness to release those feelings so that your compassion can shine through. Recognize our common humanity and that we're all having a hard time. **We're all imperfect, and we all want to be happy without suffering.**

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When we see that we're all fundamentally the same, we can stop criticizing others, as well as ourselves, for being imperfect. It helps to remember our common human vulnerabilities and to imagine everyone as an innocent baby.

Of course, practicing compassion is easier with people who are good to us and harder with those who mistreat us. When people hurt you, don't hurt back unless it's to save yourself from harm. Instead, **protect yourself**. Get away and get safe because you need time to process your pain. **First, remind yourself that whatever they did, it wasn't about you.** It was about them and their feelings, beliefs, needs, vulnerabilities, flaws, ignorance, sickness, and perhaps lack of skill. See that if you had their genes, upbringing, conditioning, and circumstances, you might very well have acted the same. When you deeply understand that were it not for grace and circumstance you too could be suffering just like another fellow being, compassion will crowd out judgment.

Now, imagine that you hurt someone just as you were hurt. Imagine the person you hurt responding, perhaps with limits on you, but also with kindness. Then imagine them retaliating against you and hurting you back. Which response would make things better for everyone? Clearly, responding with compassion to those who hurt us. Love is always better than hate. But this spiritual practice takes just that—practice. We need to be patient with ourselves as we gradually develop the capacity to spiritually override our default neurobiology to hurt others.

If you do hurt someone else, the compassionate thing to do is to reach out and attempt to make amends. Practice humility and try to repair the harm you've caused. We'll talk more about the art of repair in a later lesson.

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Use your presence practice to **notice your judgments** of others and let them go. **Replace judgments of “good” and “bad” with discernments of what is helpful and harmful.** This will help you to have compassion for unskillful, destructive, and psychologically-ill people. To love, make it your **daily intention to live a judgment-free life**, as your judgments will block your capacity to act compassionately for others.

Use your presence practice to also **notice when your heart closes**, perhaps when passing by a homeless person panhandling, or in dealing with a difficult family member. Notice how the mind judges or minimizes their suffering.

Practice holding others in your mind with reverence for their sacred nature. **Start each day with a morning intention to love, including to reduce suffering in others.** As you make this part of your daily morning practice of stillness, remember that compassion for others starts with self-compassion.

End each day with stillness and a ritual of reflection on your day. How did you do? How could you have done better? I once bought the last two ears of roasted corn from a vendor. I saw the look of disappointment in the faces of the young women in line behind me, and as I reflected on my day, I realized I would have been much happier if I'd given the corn to them. I affirmed that I'd do better next time.

Showing compassion to others takes intentional effort. Each day, set an intention to practice compassion as part of your intention to love. Make it your intention to turn towards the suffering of another rather than away. If you come across someone who is having a hard time, work to empathize with them. Give them the gift of your kind, nonjudgmental, understanding presence. If appropriate, give hugs or handshakes. Show your empathy for another person's difficulties. (We'll be talking more about the art of empathy in another lesson).

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Take the time to listen, to understand, and to show your care and concern. Ask what you might do to help. (We'll also have a lesson on helpfulness later in this course). Whatever you do, if you can just create a loving connection with the other person where they feel cared for, you will go a long way towards easing their suffering.

We'll be exercising our compassion muscles in this course with the practice of a lovingkindness meditation. This meditation and the other heart-mind practices we will be practicing will help grow your capacity for compassion.

IN OUR NEXT SESSIONS

In our next few sessions we'll focus on forgiveness, starting first with self-forgiveness, because forgiving ourselves is critical for our capacity to ground ourselves in our lovability and to forgive others.

In the meantime—between now and then, I encourage you to do 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 through 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. Add to this intention an intention for this next week to show compassion to those who are having a hard time.

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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. Reflect on the barriers to compassion in your life. Is it apathy? Indifference? Animosity? Self-preoccupation? Lack of reverence? Judgment? Nonacceptance? Lack of skill? Aversion to the suffering of others? Feeling overwhelmed by suffering? How would you address these barriers?
5. Reflect on the benefits of compassion. How would being more compassionate enhance your life?
6. What are the opportunities in your life right now where you could show the people you know more compassion? What kinds of services or volunteer work could you do to relieve the suffering of others?

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!